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OR,

The Maze of the Silver Dagger.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES GOLDSPUR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"SOL SPHINX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SILVER DAGGER.

It was a little front room on the second floor. The hour was eight o'clock at night and the rather feeble jet that burned against the wall at one side of the apartment cast a dim, uncertain light throughout the place.

At the window of the room, a window which had iron bars across it like the window of a prison, sat a man who was well known in the immediate vicinity.

I might have added that Noah Moneybox was known beyond the street he inhabited, and that he was not very favorably regarded by those whose circumstances compelled them to have business with him.

Noah Moneybox, as his name implied, was a money sharp—a cormorant who fattened on the

THE SILK-HANDED SHADOWER GAZED INTO HER WILDLY DILATED EYES TO BEHOLD THERE AN EXPRESSION WHICH UNTIL THAT MINUTE HAD ESCAPED HIS SCRUTINY. THE GIRL WAS A MUTE!

miseries of his fellow-creatures, and on the particular night when we introduce him to the reader, he was waiting for a victim like a spider at the door of his den.

That lone window commanded a view of the street below and from it he could observe a corner around which a good many of his victims sneaked.

They came at all hours, but mostly after dark, for it was not just the thing for one's reputation to be seen with the old shark, and it had come to be noticed that Noah's visitors did not remain very long.

At last Noah saw round the corner which he had been watching with the eye of a hawk a figure at sight of which a smile passed over his leathery countenance.

Presently footsteps came up the stairs on the outside of the room; then the door opened, and into the apartment walked a man who at sight of the little old hunk sitting at the window made a stiff bow and took a chair.

The light showed him to be a dark-faced, villainous looking person of forty. He was not very well dressed, but his hands were faultless; indeed, they were as shapely as a woman's, and Noah eyed them as though they had excited his admiration.

"Have you got it?" said the old money-lender's caller; "I'm here for it and—"

"That is, if I have made up mind to let you have it, eh?" broke in Noah with a voice as raspy as a file. "I don't know about you, and you see I am not acquainted with the person you represent and—"

"You want to back out, do you?" was the quick response. "You want to give us trouble and send us elsewhere at this stage of the game?"

"I didn't say that, and I don't mean any such thing."

"Then, come down to business. See! I have the papers and that was all you required," and the man pulled from his pocket a package of papers which he held in his hand, but not within old Noah's reach.

"I don't say that they're not correct; but, you see—"

"Oh well, if you think you can afford to quibble and break your part of the trade I'm satisfied."

A look of alarm came instantly into Noah's eyes.

"I never thought very well of you, anyhow," continued the visitor, leaning toward the usurer until their faces nearly touched. "You have been a spider from the day of your landing in New York. You haven't a roseate reputation, and when you intimate that you don't want to deal with me, perhaps because I don't profess to be a saint, you don't help your reputation any nor your business!"

There was no answer, only Noah Moneybox moved his chair a little.

"You confounded old money soak! You sha'n't escape my tongue. I am going to have my say out and you will have to listen," the man went on. "You won't deal with me, eh? You won't keep the bargain which brought me here? Do you dare to forget the workings of the Silver Dagger?"

At the last two words Noah Moneybox nearly fell from his chair and his face became as white as the wall against which he nearly tumbled.

"In Heaven's name, who are you?" he gasped.

"Never mind that! I know who I am and what I am here for. You must not think that no one knows your past but yourself. There are others who are as conversant with it as you yourself. I only mentioned the Silver Dagger to tell you that all was not dark to me, and that it might be well for you to keep your part of the bargain to-night."

Noah was still staring at the caller, whose eyes devoured him with devilish glee. His chair had been pushed almost to the wall and he seemed to feel that he was not safe alone with the person who had invaded his house.

"If you don't want to carry out the trade, all right," continued the stranger, rising as if to depart. "I sha'n't insist; only let me impress upon your mind that the Silver Dagger might take on a new edge, and that, when it strikes, there might be one old rogue less in this big city."

Old Noah moved from the chair and crossed the room, followed by the gaze of the hawk-eyed man.

The usurer stood in one corner, his finger resting on a button ingeniously set in the wall. The pressure of that finger would open a concealed door and then could be seen the front of a safe placed in the wall for his convenience. I have no doubt a good many people knew the safe was there, but all did not know what it contained. That was one of the many secrets the old Shylock kept to himself.

"Dan Nicobar, you want me to rob myself," he suddenly exclaimed, turning to his visitor and hesitating at the concealed door.

"I don't. Old man, remember the Silver Dagger!" and the hand of Nicobar was outstretched, its pointing finger covering the money shark.

Old Noah gasped again.

"Just as you like, old man! I was told not to insist. You went into the agreement with your

eyes open and you know what to expect if you fail to carry out your part."

"The Silver Dagger, my God!" muttered Noah.

"I guess you don't want to do what's right," grinned Nicobar, and he started for the door.

"Hold on!" cried Noah, in evident alarm.

"I don't hold on a minute," was the reply. "I have done all I was to do, and now I leave the rest with you."

The door opened and closed, and when the miser banker had reached it, he heard the steps of his caller on the stairs.

"Well, I hold the money yet!" he said aloud, with a grin. "I still have on hand the cash he wanted for the potent master he serves. But, what was that threat he held over my head? What do I care for the securities he held in his hand when I have the money, which is better than all the securities one can load himself with?"

In an instant the old man hastened to the window and looked down into the street below.

"He's going back, sure enough!" he laughed, as a figure seen for a moment turned the corner.

"He's returning to the person who sent him to me for the loan, and I would like to hear how the news is received."

"The Silver Dagger business took my breath, and I did not know what to do for a spell. I was knocked clear out, for I hadn't heard the name for years; but he knows, evidently, and if it does exist—"

He stopped suddenly, for the door had opened again; but instead of any one coming in this time, a hand which he saw for an instant only threw a bit of folded paper on the floor, and was withdrawn before he could see what the hand looked like.

Old Noah pounced upon the paper like a hawk upon a dove, and as quickly was standing under the gas-jet in one corner, looking at it with all eagerness and excitement.

"Great heavens! what does this mean?" he cried. "Is that diabolical league to be resurrected and do more dark work?"

He had read as follows:

"NOAH MONEYBOX:—"

"Beware! You are on the brink of the Rubicon. If you cross, death will be your portion. The Silver Dagger is still in existence, and it will not fail to carry out the orders of its head. The code which you know something about is in force now, as when you saw its provisions carried out in years ago. So, beware! Don't cross the Silver Dagger!"

"A PHILISTINE."

"There used to be a good many Philistines, ha, ha!" laughed the old money-lender, but the laugh was a sorry one. "I wonder which one this is? So the Silver Dagger is again to play a part in the affairs of man! Well, I do know something about it—that's a fact; but I thought I would never hear of it any more," and, re-reading the missive, he put it away in an inner pocket, touched the button in the wall and opened the door of the steel safe there disclosed.

Old Noah took from this safe a little box, which he stowed away in his bosom, and then closed the steel door again and left the room.

"If the Silver Dagger has been revived this is not very safe here; I will take it to Medusa and she shall keep it till I want it. It will be safe with her. Nicobar looked as though he would like to have eaten me raw, but if he had tried it he would have found me a very tough morsel."

His little figure flitted under the lamps of New York, dodging here and there among their lights and shadows and at last drew near a house on a street which did not connect with the great artery of the metropolis.

"This is Medusa's and she won't be looking for me," said Noah to himself, as he walked up the steps and stood for a moment at the door. He did not ring, but turned the knob and finding the door open, as it always was, he walked in, but stopped in the hall, as if a sense of dread warned him not to go further.

He was in the home of one of the strangest creatures of the great mart.

Medusa was a clairvoyant, but this was not all. It was said, and with good reason, too, that she had seen better days for she had in her possession papers which established her claim to a title; but the outside world did not know why she preferred to practice her dark art instead of living in style and rolling in wealth on another shore.

"The house is suspiciously still," exclaimed old Noah, moving on at last. "I generally find Nero, the wonderful watch-dog, in the hall when I come here; but he's not on guard now. Why, I wonder?"

The old usurer went on until he found a door at one side of the corridor, which he opened. A room dimly lighted was before him and he entered, but suddenly paused at the threshold.

A woman sat before him in a chair, her head thrown back. The face was partly turned from him, but he could see that it was the face of Medusa, the fortune-teller.

The woman did not move when the miser-banker entered nor when he advanced.

"Here I am," spoke Noah. "I thought I would drop in a moment on a little business."

Then, and not until then, did he see the color

of the face before him. Not until that moment did he note the ghastliness of the countenance nor the dreadful stare in the eyes turned toward the ceiling.

"Heavens, is she dead?" he cried in alarm, and he fell back with the cry quivering his lips and with eyes that seemed ready to start from his head.

He looked toward the door as if about to fly from the room of death. He shook like an aspen bough.

Then he saw what had escaped him until then. He noticed something glittering above the breast of the occupant of the chair.

Sudden courage sent Noah forward again. He actually leaned over the form in the chair and in that position gazed at the handle of the dagger which stuck in the breast of Medusa, the fortune-teller.

"The Silver Dagger!" gasped the old man. "That is what Nicobar warned me against! Why didn't I treat with him? But, why should it have found Medusa's heart? There is a deep mystery here—a nice thing for the police to look after. Dead? Why, of course she's dead! One would not expect a person to be alive with a dagger in her heart and such a dagger as that! It is the one I have heard of before to-night. It is the Silver Dagger of—"

A noise sounded on his ears and whirling toward the door, he stood like one transfixed with terror.

But the door did not open, and, looking once more at the dead woman in the chair—he even went so far as to feel the cold wrist in search of a pulse which he almost knew must be still—he silently departed.

"Shall I?" he asked himself when he struck the street. "No one as yet seems to have discovered this crime. Shall I raise the alarm? If I do won't the Silver Dagger be looking for me? But, why let hours roll by and the assassins have a start? Why let this case fall into the hands of the police boobies? I don't do that. This a mystery for Jason Clew and Jason Clew shall have it!"

Jason Clew was the only detective personally known to Noah Moneybox.

CHAPTER II.

LORENE.

WITH Noah Moneybox on his way to the office of one of the keenest detectives of New York, let us go back and see what became of Dan Nicobar, the old miser-banker's caller.

Nicobar was not at all ashamed to admit that he had not the best of records. This was true, as the books of a certain prison a few hours' ride from the metropolis would have shown.

Always dark-faced, and the possessor of sharp eyes and womanish hands, he had been from boyhood a man of intrigue and at the present time had a master whom he served with the fidelity of a dog.

Smiling to himself, and wondering in half audible tones what effect his visit to Noah Moneybox would have on "the Major," he retraced his steps, stopping once in a little saloon on a corner and taking his favorite tippie with his usual slowness, as if he liked it.

Half an hour later he pulled up in front of a house which he would not have entered in the daytime. It was a fine old-fashioned mansion with many things about it to indicate the wealth of its owner or occupant.

It was now considerably past nine o'clock and Dan Nicobar, instead of ringing, took a key from his pocket and entered, shutting the door carefully behind him, but not without a look up and down the deserted sidewalk.

As he closed the door he heard the rustle of a dress and the next moment caught sight of a female figure in the dim light of the hall.

"That's the prettiest girl in New York—that's Lorene," said the man, under his breath. "She always looks at me as if she wishes I'd quit coming in. Well, my pretty creature, the time may come when you may want Nicobar to be near you all the time. That's a solemn fact," as the girl disappeared. "Don't look me through. I have that done by other people—the cops, especially," and he laughed to himself at his cheap wit.

As the figure vanished, Dan Nicobar walked into a room alongside the hall and came face to face with a man who lolled in an easy-chair.

This individual was a person past forty, with a high forehead and cold, steely eyes. He was handsome, though it was with difficulty his iron-gray beard hid a scar at the corner of his mouth and thus kept to him his good looks.

He smiled the moment he saw Nicobar.

"Well, it did not take you long," he observed.

"No. I never mince matters. I go straight to the mark and transact my business directly."

"That's what I like. Let me have the package."

The man in the arm-chair put out his hand, whereupon Nicobar, who had come forward, made a feint of throwing something into it.

"What, did you let the old serpent cheat you?"

"I came away empty-handed."

"But you were not to do this."

"I was not to parley with the old shark."

"True. You were not to force it from him, but I expected you to succeed."

Dan Nicobar let his gaze run round the room until it rested on a large painting in a heavy gilt frame.

Suddenly the master of the house bent toward him and said, in a nervous whisper:

"Did she see you when you came in, Dan?"

"I guess she did."

"Go to the door and look up the stairs. You see the door stands ajar."

Nicobar crossed the rich carpet with the tread of a tiger-cat and did as he was commanded.

He saw leaning over the balustrade at the top of the flight the airy figure of a young girl. He saw, too, that her face was white with expectation, that her bosom rose and fell under a powerful excitement, and that she appeared to be listening to what was transpiring in the room below her.

He looked over his shoulder at the man in the chair and nodded.

"I thought so. She has the trait that cursed her mother," growled he.

In a moment he was on his feet, and for a second it seemed to Dan that he was about to spring into the hall and call the fair listener to account; but he merely grinned till the scar seemed to twitch, and clutching Nicobar's arm, he closed the door.

"Now, let the girl go for a moment and tell me all about your visit to the old Shylock on Z street."

Nicobar went toward the table, dropped into a chair and began his recital. He told everything—no, he did not say that he had warned Noah Moneybox against the Silver Dagger. This part of his visit was left unmentioned.

"So he would not give you the money for the securities I sent? The old fool doesn't know what I can do. I'll take them back, Dan."

Nicobar took from his pocket the papers he had failed to exchange for Noah's cash, and the man to whom he handed them threw them on the table.

"Now, Dan, I want to come down to business," he went on. "What will it cost to get what I want?"

There was silence for a moment, during which time the men looked at each other as if measuring one another's strength.

"I want what I sent you after to old Moneybox's. I've got to have it," said he of the gray beard. "I don't intend to mince matters. I should have given you different instructions from what you had, but I will not restrain myself now."

Dan Nicobar said nothing, but crossed his legs and waited for more.

"You have seen the girl in the house. You know her worth. What sort of wife do you think she would make?"

"A pretty bird with fine feathers," was answered.

"But not too pretty for your blood, eh?"

"I guess not."

"You ought to have seen her mother. But, enough of this. I want five-and-twenty thousand dollars besides the little box, which I am sure is in Noah Moneybox's safe—the safe he keeps in the wall, and the one he gets at by touching a button, ingeniously set in the cement. You know where the button is, Dan?"

"I might find it."

"Of course you might. You never fail to find anything, though now and then you do miss the mark, as you did to-night."

"I make it a rule never to go beyond my instructions."

"Curse the instructions!" cried the man. "I wish you had exceeded them to-night! You have lost time, that's all; but you can make it up, you know."

Nicobar nodded again.

"Well, get me the money and the little box—no matter how, and the girl is yours."

"Lorene?"

"Certainly. You didn't think I meant Nydia?"

"Heavens, no!" laughed Nicobar. "Nydia, the tigress? What would I do with her if I had her?"

"Choke her to death the first week, I guess," and the speaker looked at the dark soft hands displayed by his caller.

"Draw up the compact," coolly requested Nicobar, looking at some writing materials on the table. "I accept the proposition."

"Won't my word do?"

A grim smile came to the mercenary's mouth. "I'd rather have it in black and white," he responded. "There's not the least danger of having it ever brought to light. I know where to hide things. I tell you, major, I know every hole and corner in the city and when they look for what I hide they always fail."

The person called major turned slowly to the table and took up the pen.

At the same time the figure on the stairs moved a little and the sharp eyes of the girl looking down into the room over the open transom got the gleam of a serpent's orb.

For a little while nothing was heard but the movement of the pen over the paper and the eyes of Nicobar, dancing with unconcealed delight, followed every movement.

"Will that do?" asked the writer, handing the dark-faced man the just written agreement.

One of the oily hands was extended and Dan read the writing in silence.

"It's all O. K. but the signature," he said.

"You haven't signed the right name."

"You know why," was the prompt and decisive reply.

Beneath his drooping mustache Dan Nicobar bit his lips.

"I guess it'll have to do," he said. "I don't like the name you have put to the document, but we understand one another and I appreciate the situation."

He folded the paper carefully and hid it beneath his waistcoat.

"When?" asked the man who was scanning him sharply.

"As soon as possible."

"That is not very definite."

"It's as definite as I can answer you. I will do it at the first opportunity."

"You must make the opportunity."

"I will."

The girl on the stair was half way down, her eyes glowing and her hands clinched until the white nails deeply indented the skin.

Did she know that she had been bartered to that infamous city thug?—that Dan Nicobar had a paper which conveyed her to him in consideration of a crime yet to be committed?

If she had not caught all the conversation she had used her eyes to advantage, and they had well supplied the missing links. Her heaving bosom and blanched face told this.

Dan Nicobar was near the door when Lorene reached the middle of the stair.

Reaching over the balustrade she suddenly turned out the light in the hall, just as the door below opened to let the villain out.

Lorene hugged the step and waited. She saw Nicobar pass out and glance up, but the darkness hid her now, and when he had put the front door between them she came down into the hall.

Major Phenix stared at sight of her.

"I thought you went to bed," he said, as she came forward, her eyes fixed upon him.

"I want to know what you have done?" was the reply. "I demand to know the contents of the paper you delivered to the man who has just left the house."

The major assumed a look of defiance.

"You might be asking too much, Lorene," he answered.

"Too much when my happiness, even life itself, is at stake? Too much when I am thrown into the scales without my consent? You must tell me! You dare not sell me to that detestable wretch, to gain a point in the game you are playing."

She stood before him like a beautiful queen of tragedy.

"I am not yours to sell!" she went on. "I am not your child, though you have made this whole city believe otherwise. I—"

"Silence!" he almost yelled. "Girl, turn and look at your mother's portrait! Before God, that woman was my wife!"

He covered with outstretched finger the picture which had caught Dan Nicobar's eye.

CHAPTER III.

JASON TAKES THE TRAIL.

NOAH MONEYBOX found the detective at home.

When he had climbed the narrow stair leading to the small den-like room occupied by Jason Clew, the invincible ferret, he saw a light which told him that he was not to have his trouble for nothing, and when he opened the door and showed his queer-looking figure in the waving glimmer of the gas, he provoked a smile from the smooth-faced man of thirty-five who had turned to greet him.

The detective would not have been more surprised if one of the tenants of old Trinity cemetery had opened his door. He was not looking for such a person as Noah at that hour, and when the little figure shuffled forward and dropped uninvited into a chair, Jason Clew's face was a picture of mingled interest and astonishment.

"Didn't I once tell you that whenever I could I would put work in your way?" began old Noah.

"You surely did, but I hope you haven't been robbed."

"I'd like to see 'em rob me," grinned the miser-banker. "Yes, I'd give a good deal just to look at the man sharp enough to 'touch' me for a dollar. It can't be done, Jason Clew; but, that's not what I came to talk about."

In another moment the old man had mentioned a name which had a familiar sound, for the ferret smiled and inclined his head as if he expected to hear something really worth listening to.

It was the name of Madame Medusa.

"Well, she's dead," Noah announced.

"Dead?"

"Murdered! and you're the first detective who has had the news. It was a secret all my own until I came here, but now we have it in partnership."

"Then, you are the discoverer of the crime?"

"I guess so. You see, I went to the house on business, not to have my fortune told, though, and I found her all alone and dead, with a dagger still sticking in her breast."

Noah Moneybox seemed to shiver, and the detective, perceiving this, said with a smile:

"You don't like such sights, Noah?"

"Jupiter, no! Why should I? It almost gave me a fit when I discovered that Medusa would tell no more fortunes on account of that awful thing in her heart."

"It wasn't a very pleasant sight; I'll admit that, Noah. But, did you hunt for a clew?"

"I didn't; but, there's the dagger! It seems to be the very one you want."

Jason Clew reached for his hat.

"You're going down, I suppose?"

"I am, Noah. Don't you want to go back?"

"Not I! I will go home and try to forget that I ever saw the horrid sight that waits for you in Madame Medusa's house. I have kept my promise, Jason. I have put something in your way and you must make the most out of it. I won't tell another detective in the city. You're one of the keenest and when you caught that thief picking my pocket on the Battery, you secured the lasting friendship of Noah Moneybox. Don't let a single clew escape you to-night. There may be more in this case than you think. Good-night."

Clew knew the way to Madame Medusa's house and lost no time in getting there.

He found the door open as the miser banker had done, and in a little while stood in the room where the horrid figure of the dead still occupied the arm-chair.

He turned on the gas and bent over the pallid face of the woman of chance.

The silver-hilted dagger still protruded from her bosom.

"There was but one blow, but it was a sure one," he said; "but why was the dagger left here? Was the assassin a blunderer, or was he skilled in crime and left this as a defiance to the police?"

He began to look around and gave the room a minute search in hopes of finding a further clew. There was no sign of a struggle. It seemed as though Madame Medusa had died without a knowledge of the blow, and that the murderer had had his victim wholly passive and at his mercy. Not a single piece of furniture had been disturbed so far as the detective could see. The drawers were locked and the chairs placed as they were usually found by those who visited the house of magic on business.

After awhile Jason turned into another room and lit the gas there. Nothing rewarded him. He went over the whole house, but at last returning to the chamber of crime, saw something that had escaped his eye before.

This was a bit of glittering brass on the carpet, and when the detective picked it up he held in his hand a small ring which might have belonged to some one in the Italian quarter, for he had seen such rings worn there by the daughters of Italy.

He knew that Madame Medusa had for her dupes many of the foreign residents of the city; that they came often to her, spending with her their money and going off with a brilliant future before them.

Jason put the ring in his pocket and went back to where the ghastly mistress of the house sat in terrible silence.

He was bending over the hilt of the dagger with all the light he could find shining full upon it when he heard a door open.

Expecting to see some one the ferret turned, and was not disappointed.

"Ho!" he exclaimed; "what do you want here?"

The person addressed stood transfixed with terror in the middle of the room.

It was a young girl of seventeen! The figure was slight and graceful, but about the face was an expression of sadness which on the instant attracted the man of trails.

As he received no reply, he stepped forward and seized the girl's wrist.

"Why don't you talk?" he cried. "You see what has happened here. Madame Medusa is dead!"

The dark eyes of the creature wandered to the woman in the chair and her face paled.

"Go up and look at her!" continued Jason, showing the girl forward. "You may know more than those lips of yours want to tell."

She went up to the arm of the chair and bent over the dead one there. All at once, spying the dagger, she clasped her hands and seemed on the point of sinking to the floor. Without a cry of any kind she stood there, the picture of absolute terror, and if the detective had not supported her she might have fallen to the carpet.

Whirling her around, the Silk-handed Shadower gazed into her wildly dilated eyes to behold there an expression which until that minute had escaped his scrutiny.

He could not be mistaken. *The girl was a mute!*

At the moment of his making this discovery she placed one finger on her lips to tell him her condition, and he nodded his realization of the gesture.

"This dumb creature may have been a silent

witness," thought Jason Clew. "She may be worth more to me than the dagger."

The girl was now looking at him as though she were trying to read his thoughts and find in them an explanation of the terrible tragedy.

The detective took a memorandum from his pocket and began to write on one of the blank pages.

When he handed it to the speechless girl the leaf was carried to the light and the eyes seemed to devour the characters thereon.

"Who are you and where do you live?" was the line read by the beautiful mute.

The ferret handed her the pencil, but she took it reluctantly.

Leaning toward the wall, she placed the leaf against it and began to write.

How eagerly did he wait for the answer which he could see the delicate hand forming with slowness, as if the writer were measuring her words.

"Won't she never get through?" he asked himself.

It seemed to take the girl an hour to write the four words which Jason saw impressed on the paper.

"They call me Inez."

A half smile came to the ferret's mouth when he saw the reply.

"I thought you were an Italian," he said aloud. "I will try you again."

"Do you know who killed Madame Medusa?"

The answer was irritating: "Do you know?" it read.

"By George! this is a torture-box," the detective fairly groaned. "Do I know? If I did, do you think I would be asking you, Inez?"

He bent over the table on the edge of which he had written his question and wrote:

"I don't know, but I will find it out. If you know anything that will throw light on this crime, you want to tell me."

The mute shook her head.

"Maybe you know this," said Jason Clew, taking from his pocket the ring he had picked up on the floor.

The moment the eyes of the girl fell upon the bauble her countenance underwent a change. Her eyes fairly flashed with the light of recognition, and before the detective could withdraw his hand, she pounced upon the ring and had it in her grip.

"You can't have that!" cried the city man-hunter. "That is too precious a bit of brass in my eyes; and, besides—"

She had sprung across the room and was at the door she had left ajar on entering. Jason sprung after her; he made a grab for her but she slipped through his fingers and vanished.

"Not lost yet," decided the man of clews. "I know this house as well as you do."

In the hall beyond the door he caught sight of the fitting figure as it rushed into the next chamber, and followed. This room was without a light of its own, but through the door which had been left open it was partly revealed by the jet in the hallway, and the detective confidently expected to overtake her there, but, on the contrary, he unexpectedly lost all trace of her.

He heard the closing of a door but saw no door. He was sure it was not the door on the other side of the room for it was bolted on the side where he was.

"Ha, a secret exit!" he exclaimed when he halted, baffled, in this apartment. "The dumb creature knew this house with all its secret doors and passages. She evidently came back for her ring."

He sounded the walls without avail, and finally went back to the room of the dead, resolved to sift the mystery to the bottom.

If he could have looked into the future he might have recoiled from his self-imposed task, brave and steel-nerved as he was.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FATAL HUNT.

THERE are thousands who still recall the "mysterious murder" of Madame Medusa. The public did not know that Clew, the detective, had visited the house while the dagger still stuck in the heart of the fortune-teller. The ferret and Noah Moneybox had concluded between them to keep this a secret, and the dead body of the woman was duly discovered by one of her customers who, the next morning, went to the place on business, to fall back aghast and to run from the room with a wild shriek that speedily attracted a crowd.

Madame Medusa dead?

The reporter took up the case alongside the Hawkshaws who, anxious to win new renown, flocked to the chamber of death in search of a clew that was elusive as a cloud shadow.

The air was filled with the wildest of speculations. Those who pretended to know anything about the woman's past, and there were several such, did not stop to tell it all, and the account was much magnified before it got into print.

Jason Clew went back to his little room near Broadway and kept a still tongue in his head.

He was confident that old Noah kept something back from him; but just what was the nature of the information he withheld, he did not know—could not guess.

The identity of the girl who had escaped him

puzzled Jason Clew and he started out to find out something about her.

Why had she refused to disclose her name, and why, when shown the ring, had she snatched it from his hand to disappear with it, as if she had lost it in the house before the crime?

Who was Inez, the mute?

The night that followed the one that witnessed the scenes of the last chapter found the Silk-Handed Ferret—a name popularly bestowed upon Jason Clew by a newspaper reporter—in the Italian quarter of the city.

He was on hunt of Inez.

"Old Daniz will know the girl for she knows everybody who comes over from Italy," he said to himself as he drew up in front of a poor building in which dwelt a dozen families.

"Old Daniz" lived on the fourth floor and Jason reached it after stumbling over a dozen dirty children.

He knocked at a door and a voice which sounded scarcely human bade him enter.

The detective found himself in a small poorly-lighted room, in one corner of which sat a woman whose face showed some traces of lost beauty.

Daniz was past sixty, but she looked younger because of her brilliant black eyes that sparkled the moment they fell upon her visitor.

"What do you want?" she demanded, leaning forward and fixing her orbs upon the spotter.

"I'm looking for Inez, the mute."

The name seemed to electrify the old woman. In an instant she had straightened and was looking toward a certain part of the room, as if the rags there held the very object of the ferret's search.

"I don't know Inez," she said deliberately, but with the look of one who coolly lies.

"You may tell that elsewhere, perhaps; not to me. I know better!"

A reply that seemed to infuriate the woman, for she sprung in front of Jason, her hands seemingly itching to fly at his throat.

"You don't believe me! You are a detective. You talk of dragging me before your courts where they make one tell all he know and more, too. What should I know about Inez? The girl doesn't belong to me and I don't want anything to do with her."

"I don't doubt that, Daniz, but this is a case where the truth, if not told, might get you into trouble."

"What has the girl done?" demanded Daniz, showing intense curiosity.

"I cannot tell you, for I don't know."

"But you want her?"

"Yes."

"Did she dagger any one?"

"I cannot say."

"Inez has the temper of a tigress. She cannot speak, but her eyes make up for her silent tongue, and when they flash, look out!"

The woman showed her teeth while she spoke, and the detective saw that at one time they must have won admiration.

The silence that followed was broken by a step which came toward the door behind the caller, and, remembering that he was in a dimly lighted room, and in what might be a dangerous quarter under some circumstances, he turned and looked back.

As he did so, he caught a swift glance thrown by the woman toward the door.

Some one was on the eve of entering, and knowing the cunning of the Italian, before she could interpose he had sprung to the door and thrown it open.

Down the long hall he saw a vanishing figure. It was the figure of a man, and though seen but for a moment, it had startled the sly shadower.

"You didn't see him, eh?" laughed Daniz. "That was Manueto, my brother. He comes now and then, and I don't like to have him seen by you people, because he isn't fond of you."

"What does Manueto do?"

"He sells banana on the street. He come over from Italia some time last summer, but he don't like you folks who hunt men—they remind him of the same sort of people at home."

"The figure I saw Manueto's?" thought the ferret. "The woman is lying for a purpose."

"You want to find Inez, ha?" cried Daniz. "Well, go down and look into number 255. The girl lives there, or did the other day. She no lie to you, no matter what she has done. I know Inez."

"Was she always a mute?"

"No. The brigands of the mountains did it."

"Did what?"

"Cut her tongue out."

"When?"

"When she and her mother were held for ransom."

"What became of the mother?"

"I do not know."

Jason Clew soon thereafter stood on the stair just outside old Daniz's room. He went halfway down and stopped. The staircase was cast in shadow, and he could hear every noise made in the old house.

Presently there was heard slouching along the hall above, the feet of a man.

The man-hunter went back with the tread of a cat—crept up until he had reached the top of the flight, where he halted.

What did he see?

A person enter Daniz's room and in a moment vanish.

"That man Manueto?" he said to himself. "It is another of the old woman's lies."

Jason fell to watching the door along the hall. No one came up the steps to disturb him, and he appeared a statue against the wall, seeing everything in sight, and now and then looking down and hearing the constant jabber that filled the rookery.

It was an hour before the door he had watched so faithfully showed any signs of opening; then when a gleam of light shot across the hallway the detective fell back, and seeing the same man come out of the room, Jason glided down the stairs to secrete himself among the dense shadows in the hall below.

Presently the man came down.

He was not an Italian. There was nothing about him to indicate the Dago, and the moment the city bloodhound caught sight of him he started. He could not help it.

Jason Clew, standing in the darkness of a narrow cross hall, saw the woman's visitor pass within three feet of him. He was tall and handsome—past forty, but with a fine grayish beard that nearly covered his well-made face.

"Major Phenix!" decided the watcher. "What in the world brings you to old Daniz's place? You don't have many such acquaintances, and even if you had, occupying the social position you do, you would not like to be seen paying them a visit."

The man was Major Phenix, well known in certain quarters—the constant companion of the beautiful Lorene, and the master of Dan Nicobar.

He stopped for a moment near the door leading into the street.

The light of a lamp near by fell upon him and told the detective beyond peradventure who he was.

Jason Clew, leaning from his friendly shadow, fixed his eyes upon him. He saw him take from his pocket something small and rather long, like a pencil wrapped in paper, and the following moment he had dropped it into a slit in a door at his right.

All this was plainly seen by the city ferret. It was evident that the occupant of the room beyond the door was not in at the time, else why would the man deposit the object instead of opening the door and delivering it in person?

Major Phenix fell back, pulled his hat over his eyes, and then stepped into the street.

Jason Clew at once left his hiding-place.

He reached the door where the major had deposited the object and was looking into the slit for receiving mail.

Had the article been dropped into a box, or had it fallen through to the floor? and eager to solve the question, he drew a match across the wall and held it in the opening.

"I have you!" cried a voice over his shoulder, and as the detective turned, he was forced against the wall, which he struck with a crash, the assailant not relinquishing his hold.

Of course Jason fought against the terrible strength displayed by the unknown, whose face, as he could see by the street light, was partly hidden by a suddenly donned mask, for it was a little awry.

"We never let tigers of your breed get away," hissed a voice at his ear. "You are getting a little too near your prey."

A door near by flew open, and a second person sprung out.

Against the two Jason Clew could not struggle successfully. He was dragged back deeper into the shadows of that hallway, and the fingers that seemed to meet in his throat choked him into insensibility.

The Silk-handed Ferret had fallen among thugs.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF THE TRAP.

FORTUNATELY for Jason his swoon was of short duration.

When he came out of it he found himself lying in the corner of a small room dimly lighted by a single jet burning against the wall, and near by a woman, whose back was partly turned to him.

The last events in his career seemed like the pictures of a hideous dream. He recalled the attack by the masked men, the sinking of the horrid fingers into his throat, and the violent efforts he had made for liberty.

While he gazed at the woman, who seemed to be a guard over him until the coming of some person, her figure assumed a familiar look.

It was old Daniz!

He was back in the haunt of the old hag who at first had professed to know nothing of Inez, the dumb.

The woman stood near the little window which looked down upon the street, and now and then glanced toward the door, as if she impatiently waited for those who were to come.

The detective imagined that he had been dragged to Daniz's room after the battle in the hallway, and that, having been choked into unconsciousness, he had not been bound, his captors deeming that precaution unnecessary.

While he watched Daniz he recovered his strength, and all at once arose and glided toward the door.

The creature did not seem to hear him and when he put his hand on the latch and looked over his shoulder at her, a gleam of victory lit up his eyes.

Jason opened the door and closed it without noise. He left Daniz at the window and crept down the stair.

If he could have tarried longer at the first door he would have heard a wild shriek from the old hag's lips, for, turning toward the corner where he had been deposited by the two thugs, she discovered that her prisoner was gone!

Daniz flew to the door like a tigress and threw it open. Springing out into the hall, she leaned over the balustrade and looked down the steps with eyes fairly ablaze.

But, the spotter had escaped; she could not hear the slightest sound of his going, and falling back with a curse on her shriveled lips, she beat the air with her fists and turned pale when she suddenly thought of what might follow the escape.

The Silk-handed Ferret, by this time far away under the lamps, wondered if Daniz had rightly told him where Inez was; but concluded not to seek the girl just then, but rather, to visit another person to whom the reader has already been introduced; so, not long after the escape, Jason climbed the rickety stair leading to Noah Moneybox's office and sleeping room.

He found the old man in, but the door was locked and the slipping back of double bolts showed that the miser-banker was careful whom he admitted to his house.

The detective met with a warm reception, but the old fellow's face turned white, as if he had detected something unpleasant in the detective's looks.

"Noah, the case of Madame Medusa is in the hands of the police," Jason announced.

"I know. They found the body, but they don't know that we saw it first," and the old miser grinned.

"That's a fact, Noah. That secret is ours. The dagger excites the detectives as much as it does the reporters and we shall hear a good deal about it through the newspapers."

Did Jason notice that the old man's frame shook at mention of the instrument of death?

"When did you see Daniz last?" asked Jason.

Noah Moneybox nearly fell from his chair.

"I—I don't know such a person," he gasped. "In fact, I have been frightened ever since I saw that corpse in the fortune-teller's house. I didn't get a wink of sleep last night and—Heavens! I wish I had never seen this accursed city—"

"You've made money here, Noah," put in the detective.

"I know, but what pleasure have I had?"

"The one pleasure that pleases you above all others—that of making money. What, you have no enemies? There is no Silver Dagger hovering over your head, I hope?"

Noah looked the picture of fear and despair.

"It is liable to find more hearts, that infernal blade is!"

"But not yours."

Shylock started at sound of a step which the detective heard as well. It passed the door and was heard no more.

"Who lives at the end of the hall, Noah?"

"A man named Mutrie."

"Do you know him?"

"But slightly."

"Was that his step we heard just then?"

"It might have been."

"What does he do?"

"I don't know. I guess he doesn't do anything. I never see him at work, but that may be because I never go out, for I would miss customers if I did."

"Is he out at night?"

"I hear him come up the steps at all hours. He is a rather good fellow, but I never tried to get acquainted with him for he wasn't in my line, you know."

"You mean, that he never came in to borrow?"

Old Noah nodded.

Jason moved his chair nearer to the old man and looked him squarely in the eye.

"I want the truth," he said. "I am on the trail of the person who killed Madame Medusa. I want you to tell me all you know."

"All—I—know?"

"Yes, all you know."

"But I swear to heaven, Jason Clew—"

The silk hand of the city spotter fell like a snow-flake upon the old man's arm.

"I want the truth, Noah! I want the story of the Silver Dagger as I believe you can tell it."

There was no reply. The man sat self-convicted in front of the keen-eyed ferret. His face gave him away and his lips trembled.

"Who told you that I knew something? Daniz?"

Clew did not smile. This man had just declared that he had never heard of the woman from whose clutches he had just escaped, and here he had accused her of betraying one of his secrets!

"Never mind who told me," was the reply. "I want the secret."

Noah went to the door. Slipping back the bolts as carefully as he could he opened it and thrust his head out into the hall.

Then he came back and taking a seat near the detective drew a long breath before he spoke again.

"Unfortunately, I do know something about the Silver Dagger," he said. "Ten years ago I was forced into the League, but I don't belong to it now. Indeed, I have left it for good, but I fear that my life is in danger, and that even now I am signing my own death-warrant by telling you what I know. The Silver Dagger was once all powerful, but it did not exist in many places. I never knew who all belonged to it. You see, I was never taken into the counsels of those who were at the head of it."

"But you knew them?"

"I did not—that is, I don't think I did."

"But you suspected?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

At that moment the footstep came back, and a deathly pallor crossed old Noah's face.

"It is Mutrie," he said, in a whisper, clutching the detective's hand. "It is the lodger at the end of the hall—that man who comes in at all hours with a tread like a cat and a face like a Malay's. I don't like a hair on his head."

Jason listened for the footstep to descend the stair, but as it did not, he slipped toward the door and silently listened.

All was still outside, but he knew that the person in the hall had stopped just beyond old Noah's door, and was playing eavesdropper there.

He had an overweening curiosity to see this man, hated and feared by Noah Moneybox. He wanted to mark Mutrie, to see him now in order that he might know him if ever he crossed his path; and, then, it was strange that he should be listening at the door while the miser-banker told the story of the Silver Dagger.

"Don't let him know that I suspect him," whispered Noah, springing to the ferret's side and trying to pull him back. "I am a lone man here, and I can't afford to make an open enemy of Mutrie. Let him go, and we will talk in whispers, or put off our business until another time."

Jason did not seem to hear. He reached up, caught hold of the upper casing, and lifting up his body, looked down into the hall.

The light which was burning there when he came up the stair had been extinguished, but the hall was not altogether dark. He could see a figure stooping at the door.

Jason dropped back and looked at old Noah.

"Was he there?" asked the money-lender.

"There is a man at the door."

"It must be Mutrie."

"I can't say; but, now go on with your story about the Silver Dagger."

"My God, I dare not!"

"Then you are willing to be called into court and there tell all you know about the death of Madame Medusa?"

"No, no, not that!" was the cry. "I can't do that and to tell the whole story of the League is to condemn myself to the dagger!"

Noah stood like a statue of terror in the middle of the room. He glared like a wild beast at the door, and for a moment the ferret thought he would spring at it and throwing it wide, fall upon the man who might be crouching there still with his ear glued to the keyhole.

"Come, Noah. The story or the witness box!" cried Jason Clew, impatiently. "You seem to forget that while this League of death exists you are in danger. Crush it out and you are saved. I am on the trail of the Silver Dagger. Do you intend to prolong its life by keeping back the truth?"

"I—can't—tell—you—now. I dare not with that man at the door. He is there, isn't he? Come when he is not listening. No, I will come to your office. He dare not listen at your door. Mutrie the spy dare not stop there," and Noah Moneybox, with not a vestige of color on his face, dropped into his chair and fell forward on the table with a groan of inward terror.

At the same moment a footstep appeared to quit the miser-banker's portal. "Mutrie" had vanished.

CHAPTER VI.

A DOUBLE LIFE.

"COME to my room within an hour," said the detective bending over Noah who did not make an effort to look up and gave no sign that he even heard him. "You know the way. I shall be waiting for you and you must not fail."

There was no reply, and leaving him the ferret went out and down the stair to the street without seeing anything of the man called Mutrie.

Jason Clew went straight to his little room where he thought over the events of the last few hours. He was on a trail which promised to prove the most exciting of the many he had followed to the end. He believed that Noah Moneybox could throw some light on the Silver

Dagger, especially since he had confessed to having belonged to it. What was the League and why had it taken the life of Madame Medusa, the fortune-teller? Did Inez, the mute, belong to the League, and had her hand driven the pointed dagger to the heart of the woman of mystery, and why had he been pounced upon by the masked men and carried to Daniz's room?

Then, what had Major Phenix dropped into the letter slit of the door of the room on the first floor of the rookery, and what had taken the major to that place?

Jason Clew was busily engaged in putting this and that together while he waited for Noah Moneybox and felt the moments slip away in the solitude of the little office.

The hour passed.

"The old scamp is playing me false," he exclaimed. "I told him to come within the hour, and here he never shows up at all. Noah Moneybox, you can't afford to play me a game of this kind."

He waited another half-hour, when, with an exclamation of impatience, he sprang up and crossed the room.

"If he doesn't choose to tell me the full story of the Silver Dagger here, he shall under his own roof. I don't care if there are a dozen Mutries at the door!"

The detective went down on the street, and back to the old money-serpent's house.

He knocked at the door, but no footstep came forward to slip back the iron bolts. Then he turned the knob, but the door would not open.

Beyond the portal, as he could see, all was dark. He pulled himself up alongside the door, but could see nothing by looking over the transom.

Striking a match, he threw it into the room, and obtained but little information.

"I'll put a street Arab inside," he said, quitting the spot, and five minutes later he came back, leading a boy by the arm.

In a minute he had lifted the agile gutter-snipe to the transom, and heard him drop into the miser-banker's room.

"For mercy's sake, let me out," suddenly cried the boy, in accents of horror. "There's a dead man lying at the foot of the door! I kin see him with my match."

"Isn't the door locked on the inside?" asked Jason Clew.

The terrified boy cooled down enough to investigate this, and succeeded in opening the door, whereupon the detective edged into the apartment.

He turned on the gas, and bent over the man lying on the floor. It was Noah Moneybox.

"Did you look for this?" asked the boy, looking into the ferret's face. "Was you expectin' ter find the old chap dead, with the door locked on the inside?"

Jason did not reply, for he was feeling the wrist of the man on the floor.

"Isn't he dead yet, captain?"

"No."

The city ferret had discovered that a spark of life still remained in the breast of the man he had found, and carrying him to the couch in one corner, he laid him upon it, and commenced to bring back the nearly departed flame.

"Mebbe the old fellow was tired o' livin', though I don't see why he should be, seein' what his business was," said the boy. "He made money hand over fist, because he charged double interest, and never spent anything. I wonder if the man who watched him nearly all the time knowed he was likely ter shuffle off in this shape?"

"Who watched him?" asked Jason Clew, turning upon the boy.

"The man who seems ter live somewhar in this beehive."

"You've seen him, then?"

"Haven't I? But is the old man going ter die, captain?"

The boy who had been put over the transom was a bright, though poorly dressed lad, and Jason Clew was anxious to get all out of him he knew.

He felt that life was slowly coming back to Noah Moneybox. The pulse was stronger and the heart, apparently still when he came upon the scene, was beating once more.

"You say that the man who watched old Noah seemed to live in this building?" he said.

There was no reply.

"I see what you ar'," suddenly cried the boy. "You ar' a detective, and I don't want ter tell anything for nothin'."

"Here," answered Jason slipping a dollar into the brown palm of the gutter-snipe. "What was this watcher like?"

"He had two beings, or else I'm mistaken."

"How's that?"

"You see, captain, one night last month I happened ter see old Noah on the street and the next minute I noticed a man eying him like a hawk. He was a tall, iron-gray bearded man who had the keenest eyes I ever saw in a human head. He followed the old miser everywhere, not losing sight of him for a second all the time. The whole thing amused me, for I couldn't see why a man would eye old Noah, for he never carried any money with him. Well, I watched both of them, saw the stranger follow the old

fellow home, and then took a turn at following him."

"He didn't remain in the building, then?"

"No, sir; but the next day or so he came here to live, that same man did."

"The man you saw watching old Noah?"

"Yes, captain."

"Where did he go the night you followed him home?"

"By Jericho, you would hardly believe me, but he went up-town and opened the door of a high-toned looking house, as if he lived there. It broke me all up, but I made no mistake."

"You would make a good ferret," said Jason, with a smile. "You are sure you did not lose the man between this building and the high-toned house?"

"Of course I didn't. I never let him get out of my sight half a second. I could tell you everything he did since leaving this ranch. He unlocked the high-toned house as though he lived there, and when he had shut the door I saw a light flash up in the parlor."

"Do you recollect the number of that house?"

The boy's eyes got a look of delight.

"I wouldn't have missed that for the world, captain," he answered, with a grin. "It was 666 M—street. I saw it plainly, for when he had shut the door I went right over and looked at the number."

Why did a singular look come instantly into the detective's eye and why was it followed by a smile at his mouth?

"You are sure you made no mistake, boy?"

"See here. One of my mottoes is: 'Make no mistakes,' and I stick to that like a postage-stamp to a letter. It was 666 M—street and no mistake."

At this moment a sound issued from the half-closed lips of Noah Moneybox and the detective hurriedly bent over them.

"Don't—let—them—find me!" he said. "I will keep my lips sealed if you keep Mutrie back."

"Who's Mutrie?" queried the gutter-snipe, whose quick ears had caught these words in pleading tones.

"Never mind," said Jason Clew. "Go and stand guard at the door."

"On the outside, captain?"

"Yes."

The boy bounded across the room and was gone in a moment.

"Noah, I am with you," said Jason, to the miser-banker. "I came in the nick of time."

A stare was the immediate reply, but by and by a look of sanity came to the old man's eye and he pushed the ferret's hand away.

"I found the door locked on the inside and you were lying at the foot of it on the floor. Who assaulted you?"

"I won't tell you anything. I have sealed my lips forever. I will not betray the League though you drag me into court."

And the miser-banker turned on his face and buried it in the dirty pillow.

Before Jason could reply, the door opened and the boy came back with his finger at his mouth.

"Captain, a man on the stairs," he said in low tones.

Jason Clew left the miser-banker and went to the door.

Entering the hall, he slipped to the head of the flight and saw a dark figure midway down it. As he looked, the figure, instead of coming on, went back, and while he watched it it slid into the street and vanished.

"That was the man I followed that night," said the boy, catching Jason's hand.

"Go back and watch the old money-lender. There is a good deal in this case for you. Don't let him know that he is watched. You have told me where you live, and you know where to find me. Go back!"

Jason Clew bounded down the steps and out into the street. He at first saw no one, but in a moment the figure of a man came in sight, and he stopped in the shadow of the very building in which the miser-banker dwelt.

There this figure was joined by another, and in a little while the two moved off.

Jason Clew followed with the stealth of the born ferret.

He kept at their heels until they separated, apparently for the night, and then he kept after the one believed to be the man followed once before by Davy Sharp, the gutter-snipe.

An hour passed away before the detective of Gotham had the pleasure of running down his man. He tracked him to a well-to-do quarter of the city, and saw him open a door with a pass-key.

When the portal had closed on the form he had shadowed, the ferret crossed the street and walked past the house.

The number—666—was on the door.

Jason Clew smiled to himself when he saw this.

"We meet again, Major Phenix," he said. "I saw you last slipping something into the letter-box on the door of the house where Daniz lives, and here I have tracked you home. Shall I go back and see how my boy ferret comes on with his job?"

He answered his own question by going back to the house where he had left Noah Moneybox

and his guard. He ran up the stair but found the door locked, and not a soul in sight.

The boy was not an guard, but when he turned away he was joined by Davy Sharp, who had run up the stair, and stood before him out of breath.

"I've just got back," said the boy. "The strangest thing has happened. In the first place old Noah has gone off—"

"Gone off?" cried the detective.

"Yes. I was watching the door from a dark spot in the hall, when all at once a man came up and opened it. I came forward as quick as I could, but he was leading old Noah out, and the old man seemed willing to go. It was the same man I tracked to No. 666."

"That's simply impossible," exclaimed the ferret. "I have just come from his house myself. I tracked him home and didn't lose sight of him for a moment."

"But what did I tell you? Didn't I say that he has a double existence? He rented the room at the end of the hall and he seems to occupy 666 at the same time. I don't care what you've done, captain, the man who took old Noah off was the one I tracked up-town. I followed the cab as long as I could, hanging underneath it till I was shaken off at a rough crossing, and before I could catch it again it had whirled a corner and I lost it."

Jason Clew entered the miser-banker's room and found it empty. Everything betokened a hasty flight. The door of the iron safe in the wall stood open and when he sprang to the spot and looked in he knew that the safe had been despoiled of its treasures.

"This only deepens the mystery," he said to himself. "The old man is to be forced to keep the secret of the Silver Dagger. I have to fight the League single-handed. I already believe that Major Phenix and Mutrie are one and the same. But why?"

The question was not answered. The Silk-handed Ferret left the little room with the boy at his heels.

"Captain, I guess we've got our hands full, haven't we?" asked Davy Sharp.

The oddity of the remark drew a smile to the otherwise perplexed and stern face of the man of clews.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DAGGERLESS SHEATH.

If Jason Clew, the detective, had gone back to the old rookery where he encountered the two masks and from which he had effected his escape in the nick of time, he would have discovered that a removal had already taken place.

Old Daniz, the hag, had vanished as if the earth had swallowed her.

The queer creature had stolen from the trap and left the little chamber on the fourth floor quite empty.

But the ferret did not choose to go back to the old house, but, instead, went to his own office where he tried to map out a successful campaign against the Silver Dagger whose existence he had no right to doubt.

At nearly the same hour the man known as Major Phenix, wide awake, was the sole occupant of the luxurious parlor of his house, No. 666 M—street.

Few men living in the metropolis knew very much about this man.

It was said that he was a person with vast wealth to back him in every wish, no matter how extravagant it might be; that he had come to New York with millions at his command, and with but one other member of his household, the beautiful girl called Lorene.

That she resembled the portrait of the woman on the wall of the parlor there was no doubt, for any one could see this; but there was about Lorene a beauty which the painted picture did not possess—a strange, indescribable beauty which she could not have inherited from her mother if the portrait on the wall truly represented her.

Major Phenix, alone in the house, was evidently waiting for some one.

It was near midnight before any one came in, and then a person whom he was not looking for entered the room.

"I thought you were in bed," he said, fixing his gray eyes on Lorene as she came forward. "You said you were going to retire early."

"But I have had my nap out and, discovering that you were alone, I thought that I would come down and keep you company."

The girl saw that this was annoying to Major Phenix.

"But I don't want to talk to you," he said. "I would rather be alone."

Lorene seemed to draw back a step, but she had fastened her eyes upon an object which was not the face of the man before her, but the portrait on the wall.

"You said yesterday that that represents my mother."

"Of course I did," answered the man. "You look like her."

The girl let a smile come to her lips.

"If those lips could speak they might tell a different story," she cried.

"What, do you dispute my oath?" roared the major, but the color in Lorene's face did not change one whit. "You should beware how you cross me, girl. You don't know me."

"I know enough. I know nearly all I want to know of you and that dark-faced man who keeps you company. I abhor, hate, Dan Nicobar!"

"Hate before love, eh?"

"What is that? Dare you hint that some time I will love this abhorrent wretch?"

"I have known such cases."

Major Phenix reached across the table and took a cigar from a new box. He lighted the weed with the coolness of a practiced villain, watched by the fair girl whose hands were clinched and whose lips were almost white.

"What about this crime which the papers are discussing?" she suddenly continued. "What is it? An old fortune-teller is found dead at her house with a dagger sticking in her heart."

"Well, what of that?" said Major Phenix between puffs. "What have we to do with this murder?"

"You told me once that you knew Madame Medusa."

"When?"

"Two months ago when we were talking about clairvoyance in this very room. Why should any one take Madame Medusa's life?"

"A pretty question, just as if I could solve the mystery that puzzles the police! I think you ought to go back to bed at once and sleep this foolish idea out of you."

For a moment there was no answer, but it was to be seen that the last reply had failed to silence Lorene.

"Madame Medusa was a marvelous woman. She could call up dead faces on a magic glass—"

"How know you this?" broke in the major, almost dropping his cigar.

"She did so for me."

"For you, girl?"

"For me! I went to her once to test her powers."

The answer seemed to shock Major Phenix like a bolt from an electric battery.

"I did not have to inform you of my little escapade," Lorene went on. "I went alone, and therefore kept the secret without trouble. I saw Madame Medusa at home and she took pleasure in showing me all her power. A wonderful woman, but, at the same time, one who must have had enemies, for women like her know too much."

"When did this take place?"

"It was ten days ago."

"She did not know you? You went disguised?"

"I went disguised, but I would like to see one deceive this creature."

"What, did she know you?"

"Almost at once."

The scar beneath Major Phenix's beard for a moment grew livid.

"We are alone," said Lorene. "We will not be interrupted here and I want you to tell me something."

"Go on."

"Madame Medusa, so the newspapers say, was killed by a dagger with a silver handle. The sheath cannot be found, though they have hunted high and low for it."

"Well?"

"Some of the reports insist that the Silver Dagger is the property of a League—that it is the distinctive weapon of a murdering cabal which exists in this city."

"Why don't you come to the question?"

"In a moment," said Lorene, smiling. "I am there now. If what I have read is true and the Silver Dagger is the blade of a League, why do you possess the duplicate of the one that killed Madame Medusa?"

Major Phenix seemed to have prepared himself for this thunderbolt, for, instead of starting, he sat bolt upright and even smiled while he looked up into the eyes of the girl.

"I say, why do you possess the counterpart of that weapon?"

"I don't know that I do; but you must remember that there may be a thousand daggers in the world just alike. If you mean the one I keep in my room, it shows that you have been looking round and have been playing spy under the roof that shelters you—behind the door which stands between you and the street."

Lorene's hand was seen to slip downward and the following moment she produced not a dagger, but a sheath which she held out toward the man who was eying her with the fixedness of a tiger.

"You are carrying this play a little too far," he cried, throwing down the cigar and leaping to his feet.

"I want to know why this sheath is empty?"

Lorene's figure, towering before him in its statuesque beauty, seemed to hold him back. There was something in the look of the girl whom he called daughter that unnerved him, but not for long.

"When did you go mad?" he asked, suddenly going back to the chair, as if he had changed a swiftly formed resolution.

Lorene laughed.

"When did you get such mad ideas into your head? You are already as deeply affected as your mother was when she lost her mind."

The girl sent a swift glance toward the portrait on the wall and then turned upon the man in the chair.

"So she went mad?" she said.

"Yes. She wandered off in one of her deliriums and—"

He paused abruptly as if on the verge of a dangerous secret and Lorene did not press him.

"Let me see this sheath," he said, holding out his hand, but the empty sheath was not dropped into it.

"I believe I will send this to the police."

"You, girl?"

"Why not? Don't you know that the detectives are hunting high and low for a sheath that will hide the dagger found in Madame Medusa's bosom?"

Major Phenix settled back in the chair with the suddenly assumed *sang froid* of a cool head.

"Well, you take the premium for fools!" he laughed. "Send the sheath to the police? Here, I will wrap it up for you, and see that it is properly labeled. The proper place to send it would be to the Mulberry street office. I believe the silver dagger is there now, and they would lose no time in fitting the blade in the pocket. But, in Heaven's name, if you are not too mad, tell me what all this means."

Lorene would have answered if there had not come to the ears of both at that moment the sound of an opening door.

Major Phenix waved the girl toward the adjoining room, but she did not stir.

"I know who comes," she said. "I want to see this man, and in your presence."

There was no alternative, and with a bitten lip the nabob of M— street sat still and glared first at Lorene and then at the open door in the hall.

Footsteps came forward, and the next moment the tall figure of Dan Nicobar stood on the threshold.

The dark-skinned villain halted as if a rattlesnake had hissed in his path; but all at once his eyes got a devilish look of triumph, as he thought of the infamous compact he had secured on his last visit, and he doffed his hat as he executed a low bow to the girl whom he had bought of the occupant of the arm-chair.

"How is the fair Lorene, to-night?" grinned Nicobar, coming forward.

"She has a better conscience than yours, Nicobar," was the answer, spoken to the flashing of a pair of black eyes.

Dan Nicobar did not know what to do. As it was, he colored to the temples and looked at Major Phenix for help.

"Lorene is not herself," said the major.

"I should say so, if that's the way she greets an old friend."

"An old friend?" and a quick step took the beautiful tenant of the house toward Nicobar. "An old friend, did you say, Dan Nicobar? When I acknowledge you as my friend, the heavens will shed blood as red as that forced from Madame Medusa's heart by the Silver Dagger!"

The effect of these startling words upon Dan Nicobar was magical. He fell back with a gasp, seeing which Lorene followed him up with a quivering finger.

"I know what the compact is. I know that I have been sold for a price to you, but I say that when you claim your bride you may stand in the shadow of a dagger as deadly as the one which just now is the talk and mystery of the town. I shall resist the compact to the last. I shall help the police all I can, and if it be true that there is in existence a Silver Dagger League, I will do all in my humble power to break it up with the hangman's noose!"

Her arm fell to her side and she walked from the room, her last glance falling upon the blanched face of Dan Nicobar, who seemed to have heard his own sentence of death.

The rustle of her dress on the stair died away at last, when the villain slammed the door and sprang to Major Phenix's side.

"In God's name, what brought all this about?" he cried.

"Oh, the girl is in one of her tantrums."

"But she means something. What did she say about the Silver Dagger?"

"She found an empty sheath somewhere in the house."

"Oho, is that all?" and Nicobar fell back laughing. "I thought she had discovered something else."

"But she threatens to take it to the police."

"What is your strength for?"

Major Phenix ran his hand through his iron-gray beard before he answered his man.

"I don't like to go too far with her temper," he said. "But what are they doing?"

"The detectives?"

"Yes."

"Oh, they are all at sea. But look here. I guess I have completed my part of the compact," and Dan Nicobar, with the face of a victorious fiend, laid upon the table a package which Major Phenix pounced upon like a hawk.

"Dan Nicobar," he said, looking up, "your bride is up-stairs!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHADOW ON THE WALL.

THE Silk-handed Ferret was still the sole occupant of the little office to which few people ever went in vain for an expert clew-finder, when he was disturbed by the sudden entrance of a young man who came forward and threw himself into a chair with an air of despair.

"Jason Clew?" he exclaimed.

"That is my name."

"Mine is Delroyd—Felix Delroyd. I am not known to you, but you have been known to me by reputation for some time."

"Let us dispense with compliments," said the Ferret. "What can I do for you?"

"I hardly know what to say. Indeed, you may laugh at my errand when you hear of it, but I don't know what to do unless I appeal to a man of your kind. A young friend of mine is in the toils of as great a rascal as ever walked beneath the lights of New York. Not only in his toils, but the man who should be her protector is playing with this scoundrel, and I am free to say that I believe both are engaged in some game that would not stand a close investigation. You may not know much about one of these men—because not very many know anything about him—but the other one may be known to you. The first one is Major Phenix, the wealthy and mysterious personage who inhabits No. 666 M— street; the other is a man called Dan Nicobar, though I believe he has had a dozen names in his lifetime. The friend of mine who is in the toils of these men is Miss Lorene—"

"Major Phenix's daughter?" broke in the detective.

"Yes—his child, I regret to say."

"Well, what is the trouble, Mr. Delroyd?"

"The girl, I believe, thinks more of me than she would ever think of a thousand Nicobars, no matter how fine was their exterior. In fact—I believe in being plain with detectives and lawyers—I am in love with Lorene and we have pledged our troth."

Jason Clew smiled. It was not the first confession of love he had listened to during his eventful life.

"Dan Nicobar has been Major Phenix's right-hand man for years. A strange tie—Heaven knows what it is—unites the pair, and Lorene believes it is a secret that borders on crime. I appeal to you—not to interfere directly in my love-making, but to aid me in looking after Dan Nicobar and discovering what is this mysterious tie that binds these men together. I have played shadow some myself, but not with the success that I desire. I don't know 'the ropes,' as they say; but I do want to see the compact which exists between Major Phenix and Nicobar destroyed, for by that means only can Lorene be saved."

"Tell me what you have discovered by playing shadow. Which one have you watched—Nicobar?"

"Yes, the tool of the master. I followed him the other night down into a quarter of the city which now enjoys a certain celebrity. You have been there, for the papers are full of the murder of Madame Medusa, the clairvoyant."

"You followed Nicobar into that quarter, you say?"

"By Jove! I lost him on that very street."

"How near the house?"

"Within half a square of it."

"Did you wait for him to come back?"

"Yes, waited until I grew tired. He must have gone back by some other road—at least, he did not come out of the shadows by the same path that took him among them."

"What time of night was it?"

"When I lost him the clocks were striking eleven."

"Are you sure it was Nicobar?"

"It would be hard to deceive me in regard to that man. I know him so well because I hate him so cordially."

"Did you ever associate his name with the murder of the fortune-teller?"

"Not exactly. Lorene tells me that Nicobar is a tool; he never plans, but carries out the plans of others."

"Yet, he is Major Phenix's right hand man?"

"He has been that for years."

"What is his past history?"

"I do not know much of it, but it must be black enough."

"Did you ever see Madame Medusa?"

Felix Delroyd smiled.

"I might be called one of her dupes," he said.

"You?"

"I will tell you. I am a believer in the black art—I can't help it, because I come of a witch-finding family of Salem. I have been to Madame Medusa's a score of times—indeed, was pretty well acquainted with her."

"And she was free with you?"

"Not very. She guarded her secrets well, though I think she was as open to me as she ever was to any one."

"Since you admit having gone to Medusa's often, did you ever see there a dumb girl named Inez?"

"Inez, the mute?" cried Felix. "I have seen her there more than once. She had the *entree*

of the house of magic at all times and Madame Medusa always treated her with consideration, saying once to me that if Inez could talk she could tell something that would startle the city. Inez now and then seemed to be afraid of Madame Medusa; but at other times she would fall upon her knees and in her mute way implore forgiveness, for the dumb girl has the temper of a tigress."

"When did you see Inez last?"

"I haven't seen her for nearly a week."

"You know where she lives?"

"Yes. She is well known in the Italian quarter. I don't know why you have become so interested in the girl-mute, but I will say that she could not have harmed Madame Medusa."

"Not during one of her mad spells, Mr. Delroyd?"

"Not even then."

The ferret evidently thought of the interview he had with Inez in the house of magic while the dead body of Madame Medusa occupied the chair, with the Silver Dagger in her heart, for he smiled at the young man's reply, and passed the question.

"I am glad you give Inez such a clean name," he said. "She is a beautiful girl—"

"Then, you have seen her?"

"I have. I saw her where you least expected I would find her."

"Not at Madame Medusa's?"

"It was there."

"Before the murder?"

"No, after—while the corpse of the victim still occupied the death-chair."

Felix Delroyd started.

"What did the girl do?—run off in a manner that fixed suspicion on her?"

"Let me tell you the whole story," said the detective, whereupon he did so, having the most interested listener he ever had. Indeed, the young man hung upon his words as though they were his death-sentence.

"We must find Inez!" he cried, at the conclusion of the detective's narrative.

"You are right. We must find Inez."

"The sooner the better."

"Certainly."

"Her haunt will give us the game. I know the way to it."

Five minutes later the detective and Delroyd were on their way to the house whose number had been furnished by old Daniz, and on the street Jason Clew mentioned how he had obtained possession of the number.

"I have seen this creature," said Felix. "I once followed Major Phenix to her rookery. It was the queerest thing imaginable to me. I wanted to know what would take him thither."

"Well, did you find out?"

"Not quite. I saw him enter and drop something into a letter-box through a slit in one of the doors on the lower floor."

"I saw the same thing. Who lives in that room?"

"I don't know."

"Where does Nicobar live?"

"Not there, of course. There is something starchy about that oily villain. He would not make a rookery like that one his abode."

The ferret made no reply and the pair at length turned into the street on which they hoped to find the girl who had slipped through Jason Clew's hands at the house of Madame Medusa.

"That is the house," said Felix, nodding toward a singular looking structure standing a little apart from its neighbors. "We shall find Inez there if—"

He paused.

"If what, Delroyd?"

"If the nest isn't empty."

Detective and lover crossed the street and came up to the house.

The door was closed, though it looked like the abode of more than one family.

They had barely halted in front of the house, when the portal swung wide and a man came out, but the moment he saw who confronted him, he drew back with a slight cry.

"Is Inez in?" asked Jason Clew.

"Inez, the mute?"

"Yes."

"The girl's asleep, I guess."

"That's luck," said Delroyd, with a smile.

"Do you want to see her?" asked the man.

"For a little while. Will you show us to her room, and tell your wife to prepare her for our visit?"

"Come in."

In another moment Clew and his companion stood beyond the door, which had been shut again, and the man they had run across was leading them up the first flight of steps.

"Wait for me in here, if you please," said the stranger, opening the door of a room at the head of the stairs. "I will either have Inez brought in, or you can go to her when my wife has prepared her for the call."

With that he left the mute-hunters, and they fell to congratulating one another on the success of their quest.

The room was almost bare of furniture. A bed which had been tumbled since sundown stood in one corner of the place, and the jet

along the dingy wall showed the marks of pencils on the uncouth surface.

Suddenly there moved across the wall before them a shadow, which caused both of them to turn and look up at the open transom, through which the moving shade had entered the room.

"Some one passed down the stair," said Delroyd. "I remember seeing a jet near the top of the flight and along the wall, and a person on the steps in passing by the light would—"

"Gods!" interrupted the detective, as the light in the room suddenly went out.

He sprang toward the door with the word on his lips, seized the knob and pulled with all his might; but the portal was as firm as a rock.

"Betrayed!" cried young Delroyd. "Shut up in a trap by our enemies. Break the door in!"

There was no answer. The sudden turn in affairs seemed to have paralyzed Jason Clew for a moment.

Felix Delroyd instantly struck a match.

The little flame, leaping up, showed them that the room was now entirely devoid of furniture. The bed had disappeared; noiselessly it had sunk out of sight, and the floor which had let it drop had resumed its old position—all in the minute of darkness.

The burning match showed the detective a blanched face and a pair of clinched hands.

"I don't know who did this, but if we had not sought the mate girl I believe the trap would not have been sprung," said Felix.

As he spoke he dashed to the floor the match which was burning his fingers, and drawing back, threw himself with all his power against the door.

As well might he have assailed a wall of adamant.

The noise of his assault did not seem to be heard beyond the portal.

"It can't be forced," he said, almost out of breath, turning to where he thought the detective stood. "Inez is in some manner mixed up in this mysterious crime."

There was no reply, but in the darkness he felt a hand at his wrist, and was drawn toward the ferret of Gotham.

What do you think, Jason Clew? Are we to perish here?" he cried.

"I have been caught before this, but the traps have never held me very long. Wait!"

Felix did not speak again. He felt, whether Jason Clew did or not, that the chances were terribly against them.

CHAPTER IX.

GETTING AT A SECRET.

NOAH MONEYBOX, the miser-banker, was in new quarters.

If Davy Sharp had followed the cab which conveyed the old man from his old retreat to the new place, he might have had a clew for the detective, but a rough crossing had forced the street Arab to lose his hold, and to drop to the stones, thus losing sight of the cab and its occupant.

Noah was not in the best of humor, though he found himself in better quarters than those he was used to. He had been taken from his old abode without much ceremony, and had seen his safe plundered before leaving.

It was this that troubled the old money-shark more than anything else.

It was about the hour of the events mentioned in the foregoing chapter, when Noah was called upon to face a visitor, whom he eyed with mingled fear and suspicion.

This person was a rather good-looking man of past forty, with a robust figure, and dark eyes that did not suit the old miser.

"You're comfortable here," said this visitor, coming forward while he was eyed by old Noah.

"Not very," was the reply.

"But you won't be bothered by that detective with a thousand questions. That's something to be glad of."

"But my money?" cried the miser-banker. "They opened the safe before I was brought to this place, and I guess they took everything valuable."

"Do you think so, Noah?" grinned the stranger. "They don't want everything. Here, you see we don't," and he threw into the old man's lap a little packet, which the usurer clutched with an ejaculation of delight.

"You must learn to play fair," continued the man. "We don't want any trouble."

"Was I giving you any?"

"A good deal. Remember the oath still holds good!"

At these words the old fellow lost color, and his hands trembled.

"I say the oath still holds good," was the repetition. "The Silver Dagger has not lost its point."

"For Heaven's sake, don't mention that thing. I feel a chill whenever I hear of it."

"You do, eh? Well, the way to avoid that chill is to play fair. I want to warn you, Noah."

"How can I betray any one, even if I thought of doing so, cooped up in this place? You don't know what I am losing. Think of the customers

who will come to my place of business and find the door locked."

Noah Moneybox was looked at most curiously for a moment, the teeth of the watcher showing themselves in the grin that overspread his countenance.

"What did the ferret say to you that you remember after finding you on the floor of your crib?"

"I can't remember. My head was in a whirl."

"But you were conscious?"

"Really, I can't say that."

"Very well, then. Until you play fair you can't expect to get back to your place of business."

The old man groaned.

"What made you go to the den of the detective when you had discovered the dead woman in her chair?"

The question fell upon Noah's ears like a thunderbolt.

He thought that was a secret religiously guarded by himself and Jason Clew, but here the man before him knew it as well.

"What made you do that, I say?" continued the man. "You did not have to tell him—to put him on the trail. Don't you know that was rank treason, Noah?"

"I—I did not know what I was doing."

"But you saw the dagger. You knew that it had a silver hilt?"

"I suppose I did."

"You suppose so? Where were your eyes and why didn't you exercise some sense?"

"Really, as I have told you, my brain was in a whirl."

"But the night air didn't seem to cool you down one jot. You went straight to Jason Clew's den and did not rest till you had told him all."

Convicted, old Noah did not move. He felt that the gleaming eyes of the man were upon him and thought that he had come to punish him for what he called treason to the League of the Silver Dagger.

"I thought, indeed I did, that I was free—that I had nothing to do with the League any more," he stammered at last and barely above a whisper.

"You thought so, eh? You thought that because you have been making money hand over fist by fleecing your fellow-creatures, that you were not a member of the League. Why, what was the oath you took? To serve the Dagger so long as your blood ran and your heart beat—to obey its commands until you were released by an order from its head. That was the oath which you took one night."

"I admit that, but years have passed—"

"Look here, old man," and the hand of the speaker closed on old Noah's wrist. "Your blood still runs and that heart of yours still sends forth its pulsations."

There was no answer.

"Once a member of the Silver Dagger, always one," said the stranger sternly.

Noah Moneybox did not move, but looked up into the eyes that seemed to burn in the head of the man who had invaded his new den.

"You are in the shadow of the Dagger. You are even now in the dark shades of death."

"Mercy! mercy!" cried the old man.

"I have here the blade that punishes traitors," and the speaker laid on the table before Noah a dagger whose hilt shone like silver. The miser-banker looked at it with more fortitude than he had exhibited before.

"You had the code read to you when you were admitted to the ranks of the League. You know that he who betrays in any way or seeks to betray the Dagger is to die by it. This is the irrevocable law of the League."

The lips of Noah Moneybox said nothing, but the eyes were riveted on the shining blade.

"Here I am," he suddenly cried with a mighty effort. "It is better to die at once than to be all the time in the shadow of that awful dagger. I haven't recovered from the shock I received that night when I went to Medusa's and found the blade in her heart. I am ready to die."

"You are, eh?" laughed the other, with the merriment of a fiend. "When did you become reconciled to your fate? I thought that so long as there was any one to fleece, you would not be willing to quit this earth. Ready, are you? Remember, old man, that a dead usurer can't skin his fellow-men."

Old Noah sunk back in his chair and gazed first at the dagger and then at the man who had brought it to the den.

"I guess you don't want to feel the point. It is as sharp as the point of a needle and it leaves no blood behind. I want a little information, and in exchange for it I will not use the dagger on you. I don't want to take life—not even the life of a traitor. No, Noah; I wouldn't kill you just because I am the executioner of the League. You know something which might be made profitable to both of us."

Noah's eyes seemed to glitter with the light of renewed hope. Was it possible that he could effect a trade with this man who had in all likelihood been sent to take his life?

"Years ago, Noah, after you became a mem-

ber of the Silver Dagger, you came into the possession of a secret which I have reason to believe you shared with no one. You keep secrets very well when you think you can make them profitable to yourself, and this one you have guarded with great tenacity, though I can't say how much you have realized. What ever became of Evaline?"

The name was an electric shock.

"Come, don't jump out of your chair," laughed the man who had mentioned it. "I know what I am saying and when I ask what became of Evaline I know what I am about."

"She lost her mind," said Noah.

"Yes. She went mad, didn't she? She went off one night and you followed her."

"To the river."

"To the river! It was the dead of winter, though there was no snow on the ground."

Noah nodded.

"But you know that the woman did not spring from the bank and seek death in the cold tide."

"That is your opinion. Why don't you ask Major Phenix?"

"I am asking you, Noah. I prefer to get the truth from your lips. By-and-by I am going to ask the nabob of M—— street, but just now you are on the witness stand. What became of Evaline, the wife of the man who now calls himself Major Phenix?"

There was no reply. Noah Moneybox sat silent with his brown hands clasped, though the fingers trembled and his eyes did not see the face that almost touched his own.

"You are not going to tell me. You prefer to feel the point of the blade on the table rather than divulge the secret, the keeping of which can do you no good."

Slowly the orbs of the miser-banker were raised to those that regarded them with such close attention.

"If I should tell you, what?"

"You would place me under many obligations. Whatever your secret is, I know that Evaline did not die that night."

"Ah, you know that, do you?"

"Yes."

"Then, why ask me about her?"

"I want to know the woman's fate. I am interested in the wife who fled that night to the banks of the river, but who did not seek death in the icy flood."

Old Noah left his chair and crossed the narrow room. He went to the window and looked out, but saw nothing but a black wall beyond. The light of the street below he could not see at all, nor even the reflection of the same.

The tall man watched him all the time like a spider. He knew, or seemed to feel, that he had the old man in a trap from which there was no escape. He knew that Noah Moneybox, the keeper of the secret, was completely in his power, and so, settling back in his chair with the patient grin of a satisfied demon on his face, he waited for the old rascal to come back and tell him what he knew.

For some time Noah stood at the window, apparently oblivious of the presence of his caller; but at last he came slowly across the room.

"The wife of Major Phenix lost her identity that night," he said. "She disappeared as completely as though she had plunged into the river."

"I don't doubt that," was the reply. "But what became of her?"

"Don't you know?"

The stranger shook his head.

"I know what you want with the secret. You are going to turn it into cash."

"Never mind what I intend to do with it. Don't you intend to give it up?"

The hand of the speaker moved slowly toward the dagger on the table and the long white fingers twined themselves about the silver hilt.

"What will the disclosure be worth to my pocket?" asked Noah.

"You miserable wretch," cried the other, springing up and seizing the old man's throat, "can't you make a move without wanting to know how it is going to affect your purse? I won't haggle another moment over this matter. I want the secret, and if it isn't forthcoming within a moment, the police will have another Silver Dagger mystery on their hands to-morrow."

The strength of the speaker was that of a lion, for he forced old Noah across the room and held him up against the wall with the dagger above his head.

"Quick! what became of Major Phenix's wife that night?" he cried. "I don't intend to mince matters. I was sent hither to pay you back for putting Jason Clew on the trail, but I will finish you for refusing to give me the secret which may enrich us both. Out with it or die!"

Old Noah looked up and even smiled at the shining blade.

"Murder! murder! police! police!" cried a shrill voice at this moment, and the man, releasing his hold on the miser-banker's throat, fell back and turned toward the window with the mien of a baffled tiger.

"I'll see you later. You can't escape the Dagger," he said and the next second had vanished in the night outside.

Noah Moneybox fell forward and sunk into the chair with a sigh of deliverance.

CHAPTER X.

THE RIVAL DAGGERS.

"I GUESS I saved the old gold spider's life that time but I'm liable to get no thanks for it," said the little fellow who dropped to the roof of the adjoining house after raising the cry which had caused the stranger to beat such a hurried retreat from Noah Moneybox's new den.

He slid on to the ground and in a short time stood on the sidewalk and saw a dark figure rush from the house and run away.

"I think I have news for Jason Clew and before I forget one word of that I heard I'll go and give him the whole lay-out."

Davy Sharp disappeared in an instant, but soon turned up at the detective's door which he found locked.

"Not in, eh?" he said, falling back perplexed. "I might have waited awhile longer or have tracked the man home who wanted to worm the secret from old Noah. What will I do now, and where shall I look for the ferret?"

If the boy had remained in the vicinity of the miser-banker's house and had watched the man who came out in such a hurry, he would have made another very interesting discovery.

"Another minute and I would have had it," growled this person as he struck the pavement. "Somebody yelled 'murder' and that was enough, for I don't propose to fall into the hands of the cops at this stage of the game and not at all if I can help it. He knows. Yes, Noah Moneybox knows what became of Evaline and where she is to-day, for I have no doubts of her existence."

He turned the first corner and did not stop until he found himself in a small chamber at the head of a flight of steps which he had climbed amid dense darkness.

Striking a light, he took a chair and laughed aloud.

"I frightened the old chap nearly out of his shoes," he said. "I would have forced the secret from him, but for that unlucky cry of police. I wonder who made it? It came from the window as if some one had witnessed the interview. To me it sounded somewhat like a boy's voice, though it is hard to tell. Well, better luck next time. I don't intend to leave this trail until I have played my hand out. The major rests in blissful ignorance of my little side-play to-night. Confound it, why didn't I win?"

He was silent for a few moments.

"I wonder if it would pay to go back?" he suddenly said. "The old money-box might take a notion to quit the premises and thus give all of us some trouble. I think, however, he is under such dread of the power of the Silver Dagger that he will not stir, but will remain and quietly take what comes. But I ought to make sure of this."

He ended the mental puzzle by going back and ascending on tiptoe the stairs that led to Noah Moneybox's room.

Everything was still.

"Fast asleep!" smiled the man at the door.

He tried the latch with the greatest of care, but it would not let him inside.

When he had listened awhile at the door he went down again and into the street.

"There is another person who ought to know something about the lost wife of Major Phenix. She was then a member of the League and is yet. She has secrets of her own and I suspect I shall find her more intractable than Noah Moneybox was. I don't like to see her in regard to this matter, but I might look after her a little and see how she fares in her new quarters. I have time on my hands."

He walked fast and turned up at last on a street where the lamps seemed very scarce.

"This is the den," he said to himself, halting in front of a house near a corner. "This is the den to which Daniz fled after the unsuccessful attempt to cage the detective who is working up the case of Madame Medusa."

He tried the door and found that it opened. The next moment he stood in the semi-darkened hall, hearing nothing but the army of rats that fought under the boards beneath him.

"I don't know the mazes of this old trap, but if Daniz is in here I believe I can find her."

He began to listen at every door. With the cleverness of a ferret, he went from portal to portal aided by the light that burned in the hall, but hearing nothing that rewarded him below, he went up-stairs with the half-muttered remark that the woman he sought generally lived "high."

He was creeping down a hallway on the third floor when he stopped and hugged the wall.

A door at the end of the corridor had opened. "The old hag herself!" he exclaimed, watching the figure that had stepped into view.

Daniz, the dark-faced, stood before him.

The tall figure almost touched the ceiling overhead, and by the light that came from the room which she had just vacated he could see her whole form well.

Daniz had the cunning of her race. Her little Italian eyes glittered like a serpent's, and while the man looked at her he could not help cursing her shrewdness and secretiveness.

A cry fell from his tongue when he saw Daniz start toward him.

"I don't want to be found by that creature under this roof," said he, glaring at the hag. "I can't afford to be seen here on the mission which has brought me to this place. I merely wanted to see what had become of the old lady."

Daniz continued to advance and the man to hug the wall, wishing all the time that it would fall in and let him drop—he cared not where.

"Thank Heaven, she has stopped," he said under his breath. "She is not going to discover me. This is luck."

The tall form of Daniz, the Dago, had stopped; but it was at a door.

Her dark knuckles bestowed three raps upon the portals and he saw it open.

There was poked into view the head of a man whose face broke into a grim smile at sight of the woman.

"Have you got it ready?" said the man, thrusting out his hand.

The woman took something from her bosom and dropped it into the palm.

"When will you deliver it?" she asked.

"Right away."

"That is right. See that no one tracks you. The major must have it to-night. Go."

Daniz went back to her room and the door closed.

"Something for the major, eh?" said the man on the watch. "Something of importance for him. I would like to know what the messenger carries."

The speaker went down the steps and waited on the outside of the building. He saw come out the same man he had seen take the packet from Daniz.

"I know you, Nicobar," he said. "You have more names and habitations than any man in this city. You are everywhere, and you were waiting here for the message. What do you call yourself here, I wonder?"

If the man was Dan Nicobar, he did not resemble that worthy, for he was not dressed like the man we saw last in Major Phenix's house, but the spy evidently knew whom he was tracking.

It was now a clever bit of shadowing which terminated at the door of the major's residence.

The spy was forced to fall back and wait. He knew that with all his cunning he could not penetrate to the parlor of that house where he imagined that the major waited for the messenger from old Daniz, though he would have given a good deal to have done so.

Half an hour later the door opened and the messenger came out.

Now he could see that he made no mistake. The man was Dan Nicobar.

Down the street went Dan with the man at his heels and when the major's right-bower entered a restaurant he had the spy close behind him.

"Hello, Dan," said the man, dropping into a chair on the opposite side of the table where Nicobar had taken a seat.

Dan looked in amazement at the man and smiled.

"I've been thinking about you," he said. "I haven't run across you for some days."

"Nearly a week. How's the major?"

"In good spirits and taking things easy as usual."

"I'm going to leave the city."

"You?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I am liable to get away at any time. You don't seem to want me any longer."

"But there's no work for you, Dunbar," said Nicobar quickly.

"What, have you already silenced the man-hunters—thrown them all off the trail so soon?"

A start came into Dan Nicobar's eyes, and for a moment they were riveted upon the man across the table.

"What do you mean?" he asked, but before the other could reply he sent one hand across the board and touched the other's wrist.

"Not here," he said. "This is not the place to discuss our affairs. I want a bite and then we will talk in my house."

"Which one?"

Nicobar laughed lightly and began to eat.

But little more was said until the lunch had been finished, when both men left the place and Nicobar guided his friend to a room in a certain house on a dark street where he turned on the gas and pointed to a chair.

The two men were equals in stature and both were dark of skin and determined; but Nicobar was the handsomer, though he had the evil eyes.

"Dunbar," he said, "you say you are going to quit the city. You may be needed here."

"To fight the police and get my neck in the halter?" grinned the other with a perceptible shrug of his broad shoulders.

"But there may be no police to fight."

"Not when the whole lot of ferrets are looking for the hand that left the Silver Dagger at Madame Medusa's house?"

"They are not likely to find who left it there."

"You don't know these ferrets, Dan Nicobar," was the answer. "You must remember that there are some who have never turned back from a trail until they have reached the end of

it and untangled the skein, no matter how it puzzled them at first."

"The shadows of these detectives frighten you, Dunbar."

There was a sneer in the tones of the man who spoke.

"They do not, for I did not leave the blade in the heart of the witch of magic. I was not there that night, but the man who was will be found out! It was a balk; it was a poor play. Why wasn't the dagger removed? Why did you have to leave the ferrets a clew?"

"Do you accuse me?" and Nicobar with a scowl on his face came toward Dunbar and halted in front of him.

"I do not. But you know one thing. The witch was killed by the Silver Dagger. The blade is in the hands of the police. Was it one of the hollow hilts?"

"What if it was?" was the flashing reply.

"That means a good deal. What if the ingenuity of some ferret who handles the dagger discovers what the hilt contains?"

"That cannot be done in this instance, because I am sure the hilt was one of the solid ones. Look here, Dunbar. You are going off without authority. You have no authority from the head of the League to put your foot beyond the city."

"Then I won't go."

Did Nicobar believe the last words? Did he think that the man caller Dunbar was speaking the truth?

"Does the major feel easy?" asked Dunbar.

"Quite so. Why shouldn't he?"

There was no reply.

"Jack Dunbar, you shall not quit the city at this time," said Nicobar who was watching his companion like a hawk. "You meditate mischief."

"What is that?"

"You meditate mischief, I say. You have been thinking of playing a game of your own. Beware!"

Dunbar seemed to recoil a step and at the same time to move one hand toward his hip.

A table stood in the middle of the room—an oval affair with a dirty cloth covering it.

All at once Jack Dunbar stepped to the table and drew from beneath his coat a dagger which he raised above his head.

"I know the code and the penalty!" he cried. "I am as much a Silver Dagger now as when I took the oath. I know what your game is, Dan Nicobar. You are playing for a wife and I am going to balk you if I can. I love the beautiful L-rene and both of us cannot win her. I propose to pierce the heart of my rival like that!" and the dagger descending, lost its point in the center of the table.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE HOUSE OF THE WITCH.

THE last rites had been held over the corpse of Madame Medusa and earth had received all that was mortal of the Witch of New York.

The police had searched the house of magic time and again and some half a dozen detectives had gone over the scene of the mysterious murder without finding a clew, for the Silver Dagger had been taken away by the authorities and could not be seen by every one.

It was the night after the quiet burial of the remains when a man might have been seen to enter the street once inhabited by Medusa.

He vanished in an alley near the house to turn up a few moments later in the cramped back-yard of the premises and soon after showed himself to the mice which had taken possession of some of the rooms of the shunned house.

This man seemed to be disguised, though he wore no mask. He went from room to room, looking here and there by aid of a small dark lantern which he carried, and when he came back to the chamber where the fortune-teller was found dead in her chair he stopped and set his light on the floor.

"It was here," he said scarcely above his breath. "They did the deed in this room and the bloodhounds have been here by the dozen to find no clew beyond the single one of the dagger; but that has convicted no one."

He looked around the room seeming to take in every article of furniture with his keen eye, and all at once sprung forward and halted in front of a dressing-stand.

"She was a queer creature," he said aloud. "This woman was a creature of secrets, but the greatest one she carried in her bosom the police never think of. They don't know that Madame Medusa belonged to the Silver Dagger—that she was killed by the very blade to which she swore once to remain faithful and to do the bidding of its head in every particular."

He stood at the stand looking over it into the mirror that hung along the wall.

"I guess I won't find anything after the searching of the house by the keen ferrets."

He opened the drawers one by one and found them empty.

"Hark," he said, and turning away, caught up his lantern and pushed the dark tin over the blazing bull's-eye!

His keen ears had caught the sound of the

shutting of a door and in a moment he stood without the room looking at an object which had already encountered his gaze.

A beautiful young girl stood before him, tall and exquisitely molded.

"It is Inez!" he exclaimed as he watched her. "What brings her to this house?"

The girl did not see him for he had entered the room when her back was turned to the door by which he came in and she was now looking at her face in the mirror across the chamber.

When she turned away from this to her pleasing occupation she set her light on a stand and dropped upon a sofa.

"What's up now?" said the watcher, as the hands of Inez began to move toward the head of the sofa as though she expected to find something there.

He saw her open a little place near the top of the sofa, and reaching in, draw out a package of papers which she transferred to her bosom in a flash.

"The cunning girl! She knew they were there, and she has found what would delight the police and the ferrets. Those papers might give them the very clew they want. She was Madame Medusa's best friend. That is, it is said that the witch took a fancy to Inez, the mute. Now, what is she going to do with her find—deliver it to the police? Will she betray the Silver Dagger?"

The speaker continued to regard the girl who had restored the top of the sofa to its proper condition, but the papers were safe in her keeping.

The finding of the papers seemed to fill her with delight and triumph. She looked around but did not see the pair of eyes watching her from behind an arras at one side of the chamber.

"I want those papers," fell from the lips of the watcher. "I don't care what she intends to do with them; they are worth more to me than to her."

Inez moved toward his place of concealment. Her steps gave forth no sounds.

She was passing into another room when a hand behind the silken arras arrested her progress.

Falling back with a look of terror, the mute girl glared at the face which had come into view and then threw up one hand as if to prevent the robbery of the documents.

"You can't carry off the evidence that the detectives want," he hissed, forgetting that the tongue, if the mute had one, was silent forever. "I am here and you shall give them to me."

Inez seemed to read the words by looking at the lips that moved in their utterance.

Her recoil was answer enough. She did not intend to give them up.

The curtains, parting, brought the whole figure of the man into view and he bore the girl back over the carpet, clutching her wrist while she tried to break from his iron grip.

"You sha'n't get away!" he cried. "I have you in the toils and I will see who is the stronger. You have found the very papers I want. I won't let you go with such evidence in your hands. Come, my silent beauty, give them up."

If Inez was a woman she was possessed of the powers of a young tigress. The eyes she owned seemed to change color as they burned in her head. She exerted all her strength and by a desperate effort wrenched herself loose.

Her backward spring was followed up; the man did not intend to let her get away.

In the frenzy of the moment the hand of Inez missed the knob and he was upon her with a laugh when she turned to confront him once more.

"I told you so!" he cried. "I am to have the papers or you never quit this room alive."

Inez straightened and passed one arm before her face. The sweep of the hand seemed to touch the face before her, for the man fell back and gave her a breathing spell.

Quick as a flash there leaped into the light something that glittered.

"A dagger, eh?" he cried, seeing the steel that shone in his face. "I have seen such things before and in beauty's hands, at that. Don't think that I fear the toy in your possession when I am a child of the Silver Dagger."

He rushed forward to the attack, but the steel passed again before his face, so close this time that he actually felt it, and before he could clutch the wrist of Inez the door opened and she was gone.

To follow her was but the work of an instant. He bounded forward into the adjoining room, but Inez was not there.

His experience was the same as Jason Clew's and in the same house, at that. The mute beauty had vanished as if the floor had opened and swallowed her.

"She knows the secrets of this old house," he said, chagrined over his discomfiture. "There are secret panels and buttons in the walls. Madame Medusa taught her all the mysteries of the house, and she has only availed herself of the knowledge."

For a moment he did not know what to do.

"It is madness to lose her thus," he cried. "I

had the secret of the house in my hands, but the girl has robbed me."

By-and-by he went into another room and came to a sudden halt at the door he was about to open.

"Some one is in there," he said. "Has the girl come back?"

The next moment he drew his body up along the door, and looked into the room beyond by aid of the transom.

For a moment he saw nothing, and then his eyes alighted on the figure of a man seated at a table in one corner of the apartment.

The back of this personage was turned toward him, but he could see that the shoulders were those of a person in well-bred life, that the garments worn by the man were excellent—not those of a common house-breaker.

Before the man lay some papers, which he was examining with care.

"Has he robbed the girl who got through my fingers?" he asked himself.

All at once the face of the man was turned partially toward him.

He almost betrayed his presence by a cry.

"What brings you here, Major Phenix?" he said. "What fetches you to the house of mystery and death? Did you run across Inez and despoil her? Oh, how I would like to be near enough to look over your shoulder. I would give any thing to have robbed the mute."

It was at the expense of some good muscles that he clung to the transom, but all at once he dropped to the floor and drew a chair to the door. Standing upon it, he managed to look down into the room where the man was reading the papers.

His eyes fairly burned with suppressed excitement, and his fingers itched to tear from the nabob's grasp the documents he handled with such care.

"Great heavens! the girl again," he suddenly exclaimed.

A part of the wall on one side of the room had opened without noise, and the man at the transom saw appear there the face of Inez, the mute.

The face of the girl was white, the lips welded and the eyes glaring.

She saw nothing but the scene before her. She saw the man at the table, saw his moving fingers as he went through the papers, and perhaps noted how his eyes glittered with unconcealed victory.

"What will she do?" thought the watcher. "Will she let him play his hand out, or will she attempt to rob him? Ah, it is to be robbery!"

Inez had stepped from the wall and stood in the room with Major Phenix. He was totally unaware of her presence, and with the stealthy tread of a cat she moved toward him, her feet sounding no alarm on the velvet carpet.

Nearer and nearer came the gliding form of Inez, the mute.

Major Phenix had gone through every paper but one, and they were heaped at his elbow, a little pile which the girl was eying with intense eagerness.

It was step by step, and yet the man did not suspect the presence of any one.

"Let her take them. I would sooner try to rob her than him," said the man at the door. "I believe she will prove too much for him; and then she is prepared, for the dagger is lying along her white arm, and from what I have seen of her, she will not hesitate to use it."

Inez paused at last immediately behind Major Phenix's chair.

One of her hands was lifted above his head, and was held in mid-air for a moment.

All at once it descended with the lightning rapidity of a dagger-stroke, and closed on the papers on the table.

Major Phenix fell back with a cry of surprise.

"You?" he cried. "Here, give me back those papers, or, by the heavens above us, you shall never quit this room alive!"

The eyes he looked into flashed with triumph; the figure of the girl fell back, and he left his chair with a bound.

But the nabob of M— street was not quick enough. An agile leap carried Inez across the room; she sprang into the opening in the wall, and the panel, shooting back, clicked in the major's face.

"Just as I expected!" laughed the man at the transom.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAP THAT LOST ITS RATS.

"Do you know how we got here?"

For a moment there was no reply to this question.

It was asked in the dark, and from out the dense gloom no answer came to reward the questioner.

"Why don't you speak? It cannot be that you did not hear me, Jason Clew," said the same voice.

"I beg your pardon, Felix. I was listening at this wall, and did not want to speak for a second. Do I know how we got here? Yes. It is very simple to me. We were secured in the room up-stairs by a piece of cunning, and thrown against one of the walls by the tipping of the

floor. After that we were conveyed to this place, which seems to be under ground, and here we are in a trap, set by the man who came to the door of the house which we were about to enter in search of Inez, the mute."

"I believe you are right; but what do you hear by listening at the wall?"

"Nothing, now."

"But you did hear something?"

"I thought I did, but one-half of New York burrows like rats, and the sounds that came to my ears may have come from a distance, and we need not pay much attention to the noises."

Jason Clew, the Silk-handed Ferret, had spoken truly. With Felix Delroyd, his young companion, and the lover of Lorene, he stood in the depths of an underground chamber, the walls of which were nearly square and composed of rough stone.

His theory of their coming to that spot was the correct one. We left the entrapped friends in the room to which they had been decoyed by the man who met them at the door of the house, and the sudden tipping of the floor had thrown them against the opposite wall with force enough to render them unconscious, during which period they had been carried to the room in which they now found themselves, like two rats walled up in a dark cellar.

"What do you think?" asked Delroyd, after a pause. "Was Inez in the house?"

"I think she was, or, if not, those who inhabit the place knew enough to know that we were their legitimate prey, because we wanted the girl."

"Then, you believe that we are in the hands of the Silver Dagger?"

If there had been a ray of light in the chamber Felix Delroyd would have seen the smile that for a moment wreathed the lips of the city spotter.

"How can I think anything else under the circumstances?" asked the detective. "We are in a trap of the Silver Dagger's setting. I see in this the cunning hand of a person who escaped me the other night."

"Whose hand, Jason?"

"Daniz's."

"I wish I had the old hag by the throat!"

"You wouldn't throttle a woman, Felix?"

"It would be doing society a favor to throttle that one," was the reply. "I see in our incarceration the hand of that princess of iniquity. She knows where Inez is, and what the girl knows, besides. We must pay her back if ever we get out of this trap."

The last words seemed to have a singular sound. If ever they got out!

They could not tell how long they had been in the dark cell-like prison. They had been deprived of their match-boxes, and could not consult their watches, which had not been taken from them. But they could listen at the stone walls, and try to calculate time by the distant noises which told them that the streets were bustling with every-day life.

Felix Delroyd had paced the walls of the dungeon time and again.

He seemed to know the shape of every stone by feeling it, for he had employed his hands as high as he could reach, in hopes of finding one loose enough to pull from the wall.

Suddenly there came to the ears of both men a sound different from any they had yet heard.

Jason Clew bent forward and put his ear against the stones.

"There seems to be some one on the other side of this wall," said a voice at his elbow.

"I hear the sound. It may be deceiving. Let us wait. There is no telling who makes it, and it is as likely to be the work of an enemy as of a friend."

A few minutes of silence followed when a voice was distinctly heard.

"Which is the stone that pulls out?" was the question that both the buried men were treated to.

"It is marked with a red cross. Hold the light a little to the right and look sharp."

"How? That way?"

"Yes. Move it on; there! Now, can't you see the stone?"

"I see it now."

"Pull it down and throw your light into the small dungeon. We want to make a final report to him."

Jason Clew and his companion now knew that two persons were on the other side of the wall and that they were about to take out one of the stones for a purpose.

With the assistance of their hands they soon discovered which one had been selected for removal, and with bated breath waited as men similarly situated had never waited before, for the result.

"It is our time—now or never," said the lips of Felix at the detective's ear.

The only answer he received was the silent pressure of the hand; but it was enough.

The stone which Jason Clew was touching was beginning to move, and all at once the detective caught his companion and pulled him back alongside the wall.

The noise that accompanied the removal of the stone was not very great and in a little while the captives of the trap were told that

it had been pulled from the wall by the gleam of light that fell across the floor of the dungeon. "There's nothing in this infernal place!" said a voice.

"Nonsense! Throw your light everywhere."

"That is just what I have done, and yet I tell you the spot is uninhabited."

"Impossible! There could be no escape. Do you think I would let such rats get out?"

The hands of Felix clinched at these words for he recognized the voice.

"That's the hag I wanted to choke," he said to himself. "That is Daniz, the Dago."

"Is the hole large enough to let you creep through the opening?" asked the woman.

"I don't know."

"Try it."

The light which had penetrated the place seemed to be handed back to the woman and the room was as dark as before.

"The villain is coming in," whispered Felix.

"Let him come! There will then be three rats in the trap."

The hole in the wall was just large enough to admit the man by tight squeezing. He wriggled in with great difficulty and at last seemed to stand erect.

"Are you inside?" asked the woman.

"Yes."

"Follow the wall around. You don't need the light unless you find two bodies on the ground."

Jason Clew thrust the impatient Felix behind him. He knew from which direction the searcher would come and had made up his mind what to do.

Like a lion waiting in the dark for its prey, the detective waited for the man creeping upon them along the wall. He could not see his hand before his face, and the gleam of light that lay on the ground in one spot afforded him no light at all.

He had to use his fingers for eyes.

"It is as dark as Egypt in here," said the man, coming on. "I can't see a stone, and the ground is rough."

"Pshaw! you'll be backing out in a little while. Go on, and take your heart out of your throat."

"Ha, yours would be where mine is if you were in here."

The ferret stood by the wall, with his hands held before his face, quietly waiting for the man coming down upon them.

The voice had guided him, and he knew about when to look for the throat he could not see.

"Haven't you found them yet?" said the voice of Daniz.

"Not yet."

The last words thrilled the Silk-handed Ferret.

The speaker was at the very tips of his eager hands.

The next moment there was a slight noise which Daniz did not hear. It was nearly like a death-gurgle, but slight as it was it was quickly suppressed.

"Jason has found him!" went through Felix's mind. "That ferret has the eyes of an owl, and I believe he can see in the dark."

Yes, Jason Clew, whether he had the orbs of the owl or not, had caught his man. His hand, shooting out with no noise as it grazed the rough stones in the wall, had found the throat of the man in the dungeon and had closed there, sinking around the trachea as suddenly as the tightening of a lasso!

Felix, leaning forward, heard the beating of his own heart. It seemed to him that he heard the last throbs of another's in the dead silence which followed the death-gurgle.

"Get through with your work as soon as possible," said the voice of the woman beyond the wall. "We can't remain here all night, and you know we have other work to do. The girl must be watched—now more than ever, and—"

"I'm coming back now."

"What, have you found them?"

"Yes."

"I told you they could not get out. If you can't get through the opening easily pull out another stone. The one above the hole will move."

Felix Delroyd's hand was touched by the detective's and he was pulled downward.

"We are going out," said the lips of Jason Clew. "It is now or never. I will enlarge the hole and go through. The hunter is safe enough. Stand ready to follow me."

Felix could not see the ferret at work, but he could hear him.

It did not take Jason long to remove the extra stone and in a moment he was creeping through the opening head foremost, but with his face near the ground.

Seconds were hours in the mind of the young man who awaited the outcome of the daring adventure.

"Ha! ha! I said the rats were still in the trap," he heard Daniz chuckle. "The next time you doubt me you will know it. Ah, here you are."

"Yes, I am here!"

The answer was a wild shriek as the woman who held the light fell back almost to the wall beyond her and stared at the man who had leaped up from the ground.

"The rats are alive!" cried Jason Clew, and then he went at the ogress of the rookery and pinned her to the wall with his eager hands, from one of which fell the light to blaze at their feet.

She said nothing more, but only glared at Jason as Felix squeezed his body through the opening and rushed to his friend's assistance.

One hour later the little office of the Silk-handed Ferret of New York was occupied for a moment.

Jason Clew opened the letter-box at his door and ran his eyes rapidly over the letters that had accumulated during his absence.

One not sealed he seemed to select from among them all and leaning toward the light, scanned it eagerly.

He could not keep back a smile as he read:

"CAPTAIN CLEW:—

"Why don't you show up to yer pardner, Davy? I have some news for you, for I've been usin' my eyes ever since I saw you last. Whenever you git this don't furgit ter call at my residenz No. 28 Bottle Alley. Don't knock but walk right in an' if I'm not at hum, Tildy will give you news of me. Don't furgit. I have news. DAVY SHARP."

"This letter is worth more than all the others combined," decided the detective. "I'll treat it as such anyhow," and in a minute he was on the street.

Once more at liberty! Once more on the hunt of the Silver Dagger, ready to take up the trail he believed he had struck when caught by the trap.

A long trip but a quick journey brought him to the home of the street Arab, Davy Sharp. He did not knock, but walked "right in," to be greeted by a woman who eyed him suspiciously.

"Where's the boy?" asked Jason.

"In yon room."

"Call him out."

"I can't. Davy Sharp is dead."

CHAPTER XIII.

A STARTLING PANTOMIME.

To say that Jason Clew was thunderstruck will not describe the situation. He looked first at Tildy and then at the closed door at the adjoining room.

"I don't like to believe that," he said at last.

"But you must, sir."

"You are Tildy?"

"I am Tildy."

"His sister?"

"Bless you, no. Me an' Davy were orphans an' came here to live where we could do it on the cheaps. He was killed at a crossing this morning and but for his name being on the only letter he ever got that I knows of, which was in his pocket at the time, they wouldn't have known where to have taken the body. Would you like—?"

The girl, who was older than the detective's little friend, had taken a step toward the door and he was at her heels.

Opening the door softly, Tildy led the way to the room beyond where she held the light above her head, enabling the ferret to see the form of a boy covered with a sheet on the poor couch in one corner.

Jason Clew crossed the room and lifted the linen.

"I don't know about this," said he to himself, reaching behind him for the light which the girl placed in his hand.

He held the candle close to the face on the pillow. It was bruised and swollen, and with the other hand he opened one of the eyes.

"What color were Davy's eyes, Tildy?" he asked.

In an instant the girl was at his side, giving him a look of astonishment.

"They was black," she said. "The blackest eyes an' the purtiest in New York."

"Will you look at these eyes, Tildy?"

The poor girl looked a moment and then recoiled with a strange cry.

"Why they're blue!" she exclaimed.

"Of course they are. Either you must have been mistaken all along about the color of Davy's eyes or else they've deceived you with the wrong body."

"They have! they have! As I live, this isn't Davy Sharp. The eyes prove it isn't, don't they? But the letter. They brought it home with them an' that was proof enough—so much so that no one ever thought of lookin' at the eyes."

There was a mystery here which the detective did not try to solve. He had noticed the clear black eyes of the boy, but the ones now before him were blue, clearly proving that a fraud had been perpetrated by somebody.

"What shall I do?" cried the girl.

"Have the corpse sent to the Morgue."

"But that letter? How do you think it came to be found on the body the men brought here?"

Jason Clew could not answer, and when he was squares from the house the question puzzled him as much as ever.

"If Davy comes back send him to my den," were the detective's parting words when he left Tildy in the flush of her new joy, even though there was a corpse in the house.

He went back to his little home and entered.

He had barely shut the door when a nimble

foot came up the steps, and Davy Sharp, looking quite unlike a dead person, bounded into the room.

"Ah, you're back!" he cried, bending over the table, his black eyes glowing with intense delight. "I have news for you. I saw a picnic not long ago—saw a man try to get a secret from old Noah Moneybox and if I hadn't yelled 'Murder! police!' he might have succeeded."

"What, have you found Noah?"

"I've found no one else, and that's the news I said I had for you. You got my note?"

"Yes; but I found you dead at home?"

"Oh, I've fixed up that affair. It was what the reporters call a case of mistaken identity."

"But your letter?"

"I gave it ter Jimmy Hope who wanted 'copy' to write by, an' that's how he went ter our house when they picked him up dead in the street. He's gone ter the right shanty this time, an' Tildy says she won't buy her mournin' just yet."

Jason Clew listened to all the boy had to tell and when the story was finished he said:

"Davy, the man who wanted to force from old Noah what he knew about the mad wife of Major Phenix is the one we want to find."

"I've run him down since then."

"Do you mean that you know where he lives?"

"I know."

The detective felt like grasping the young ferret's hand.

"But I don't see—maybe because I can't reason like an old hand—what this has to do with the crime of the Silver Dagger."

The observation drew a smile from the detective.

"I don't want you to give anything away," continued Davy. "Keep your secrets to yourself, Jason Clew; but here's another thing. I have found out who Mutrie is—Mutrie the man who lodged at the end of the hall that ran past old Noah's door."

"Well?"

"When he is not Mutrie he is Major Phenix, the nabob of M— street. Didn't I tell you once before that he was a man of two lives? and now that I've been using my eyes since I became yer pardner, I've made a few more discoveries. Major Phenix, disguised as Mutrie, is the man I've caught watching old Noah in the Park an' elsewhere. Curious, ain't it, Jason?"

"Does Mutrie still occupy the room?"

"He has given it up, which, in my opinion, means that Noah Moneybox needs no more watching from that quarter."

"That is good reasoning if he has really given the room up."

"Well, he has, for I climbed over the transom and found everything not fixtures in the room taken away. He has gone back to being Major Phenix entirely, and to have some one help him he has advertised for a boy."

"When did he do this?"

In reply Davy Sharp drew from his shallow pocket a bit of paper which he proceeded to smooth out in the detective's presence.

"A detective must take advantage of everything," he said, looking up with a grin while his black eyes twinkled. "I saw this in the proper column and nailed it to the mast. Here it is."

Jason Clew took the advertisement and read it aloud:

A boy was wanted at No. 666 M— street.

"I've been thinking that I would fill the bill," said the boy.

"You?"

"Why not? Wouldn't you like to have some one in Major Phenix's house just now?"

Jason Clew would have asked for nothing better, but the thought of sending the bright young "pardner" into the clutches of that man was revolting.

"I want the job an' I kin see that you would like to have a spy in that house," he went on. "I don't think I'm a chump if I never have had a education. What I know I have picked up on the streets. Tildy taught me ter read, an' I guess I know when to lie low."

The friends continued to discuss the situation, and the upshot of it was that on the morrow Davy Sharp should present himself at the door of 666 M— street in answer to Major Phenix's advertisement for a boy.

"It is dangerous for the boy, but I believe he will take care of himself. I must know something of the interior workings of this cabal. I must discover something about the inner life of the man who has been living two lives at the same time, and Davy Sharp must cross the threshold of mystery and danger."

He bade the boy good-night, and parted with him on the street.

He went down to his eating-stall disguised, and coming out sauntered toward the house where the dread trail of the Silver Dagger had started.

All at once he stopped when passing Madame Medusa's house and looked at the closed windows.

Surely he saw the glimmer of light between the slats, but only for a moment.

What if the girl had come back to the house of magic?

Jason Clew passed on to the alley and plunged

into its gloom. Climbing the fence at the foot of the lot, he glided toward the house and found a door open.

It did not take him long to enter and in a short time he stood under the same roof where he had come face to face with one of the late mysteries of the metropolis.

There was a light in the room beyond in the one in which he had seen Madame Medusa in her chair with the Silver Dagger in her breast.

On tip-toe the detective of Gotham slipped forward and opened the door.

A dim light pervaded the apartment and he soon discovered that it came from a shaded jet near the wall. There was a shadow between him and the light.

"Gods!" he cried. "The mute girl is here again. Does she haunt this house all the time?" Inez, the beautiful, silent creature, stood before him, but her face was turned away.

The arm-chair of Madame Medusa stood in the middle of the chamber.

All at once Inez whose hand was seen by the keen-eyed sharp to clutch a dagger, crept toward the chair from behind.

It appeared to him that the dead had come back to life and once more filled the chair.

He watched the mute girl as he had never watched her before. He saw that the same ring which on a former occasion in that very house she had snatched from his palm glistened on the white band now lifted above her head with the shining, needle-pointed dagger poised in mid-air over the seat.

Inez, the mute, stood in this attitude a second when she seemed to seize some one in the chair and to pull back with one arm the head of a victim.

The very action of the mad girl was so full of horror that the watching shadow felt a cold thrill at his heart.

All at once down came the dagger and was buried full length of the steel in the back of the chair where the heart of an occupant would have been!

There was but one stroke, as if the blade had found the seat of life, and Inez, falling back, glared at the blade buried in the velvet of the chair.

It was the most exciting pantomime the city shadow had ever witnessed and quite real enough to make his blood run cold.

For a moment the girl permitted the dagger to remain in the cushion when she suddenly sprung forward and tore it out.

"What will she do next?" the detective asked himself.

He was answered almost before the query had left his lips. Inez's right hand was put forth toward the light, there was a click of the burner and all was dark.

The next second the New York ferret heard a footstep and then the opening and closing of a door.

"In that way," said he, "Madame Medusa was murdered by the Silver Dagger!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BREAKING THE SCENT.

THERE was now another rat in the cellar-trap, and walled up by the hand of Jason Clew, the Silk-handed Ferret, Daniz could pace the damp floor of the dungeon of her own making and reflect on the uncertainties of triumphs.

If Felix had had his way, the old hag would have been left dead in the place, but the detective would not listen to such vengeance, and when the two left the underground cell, Daniz was left to keep a dead man company.

Like a tigress cooped up, she walked back and forth, beating the cold walls with her bony hands, and swearing all manner of revenge against those who had left her to her fate.

Some hours later, help came to her in an unexpected manner, and the old woman, more dead than alive, for being forced to keep a dead man company, was released by a man who came down into the cellar opposite to look after her. He pulled the stones out of the wall, and the old Dago crept through the opening, and clutching the deliverer's hand, breathed a sentence that fairly startled him:

"The rats have escaped, and the bloodhound of New York is at liberty to hunt us all down!"

The man—Dan Nicobar—stood in her presence for a moment paralyzed.

"If that be true, we must play a swift hand," said he, at last. "We must let no grass grow under our feet. This man is dangerous."

"Of course he is dangerous. He is a tiger at large, and will not stop until he has ferreted out the mystery. Where is the girl?"

"Inez?"

"Inez."

"I don't know."

"Let us go and see. She must not get out of our sight."

The two went up together, the man eying the woman with curious looks.

At the head of the steps leading from the trap, Daniz paused and looked back at Dan Nicobar, who was close at her heels.

"How goes your courtship?" she asked, a twinkle in her black eyes.

"Oh, it progresses fairly," smiled the man.

"I don't intend to let the girl slip through my fingers."

"You will have to look out. You know who the detective's companion is?"

"I know. He is in love with Lorene, himself, but that will do him no good. I would like to see him win a wife against the hand of Nicobar!"

"Backed by the Silver Dagger, eh?" grinned Daniz. "I don't think he can do anything of the kind, but we must watch them both. This boy has the detective for his helper, and there is danger—always danger while Jason Clew is at large."

"So the rats are out of the hole?" said Nicobar to himself, when he was out on the street again. "If I had delayed my visit, there might have been two dead rats in that old trap—Daniz and her tool. At large to go back to the trail and to help the young man against my little game? We found Inez asleep. The mute girl is as cunning as a fox, and if she could talk—But she cannot! She will never be able to tell what she knows, and I don't believe she would tell if she could."

They had found Inez asleep in one of the little rooms of the house and Dan and Daniz had watched her for a few moments.

Nicobar turned up in another part of the city and after creeping up a narrow street, knocked at a door which was opened at once and he slipped in to confront the man who smiled when he saw him.

"You're in better humor than you were when I saw you last," said Major Phenix's right-hand man.

"Never mind that," answered Jack Dunbar. "I meant what I said when I drove my knife into your table and swore that I would like to perforate the heart of the man who came between me and Lorene. You say you haven't any intentions in that direction, so that is all right. I don't intend to have any one between myself and the beautiful Lorene. It is true that I haven't asked her to become my wife, but time enough yet for that. What is it?"

Nicobar had taken a seat and was looking at Dunbar with the eyes of a lynx.

"You told me once that Inez—Inez, the mute, you know—had a history all of which was not known to all of us—not even to Daniz who watches her like a tigress," said Dan.

Jack Dunbar pushed his work away and turned slowly upon his caller.

"What makes you bring that up at this time?"

"I am curious," was the reply. "I happened to see the girl a few hours ago and naturally thought of what you told me once."

"Yes, she has a history," and there Dunbar shut up like a turtle and said no more.

"He doesn't want to tell me," said Nicobar. "He wants to keep his information to himself and I will have to work like a beaver if I get another word out of him."

"Well, you don't have to tell what you know," he went on aloud. "I am not very anxious to get at the secret of the girl's life and if you don't want to divulge it, it is yours to keep. She is liable to get into trouble—"

"Inez?" cried Jack, whirling in his chair and giving Dan a wild look.

"Yes, Inez."

"Where is she?"

"Still under Daniz's eye and she is safe as long as she is there. But suppose some of these ferrets who are busy on the Madame Medusa affair should take it into their heads that the dumb girl knows something about the mystery—"

"Do you think they're likely to do that?"

"You know them as well as I do," answered Nicobar. "You have had dealings with ferrets before this, and, as a rule, they are shrewd, and hit upon some queer ideas when on a trail."

"But what should lead them to Inez?"

"Her association with Daniz for one thing, and one of these men, Jason Clew, knows that Daniz is, some how or other, mixed up in a mystery."

"Then, by heavens! that man is dangerous!" cried Jack, striking the table with his fist. "He is not the man we want at large. But let him suspect Inez; let him suspect that she even knows anything about the death of the old fortune-teller, and—"

He did not complete his sentence, as if the look of Nicobar prevented, but arose and crossed the room.

"When did you first meet Inez, Jack?"

Dunbar turned upon the speaker like a flash.

"See here! I have secrets of my own. When did I first see Inez? I don't propose to tell you when."

Rage leaped up in Dunbar's eyes, and he leaned toward Nicobar and regarded him with a scowl on his face.

"Why keep it from you?" he suddenly went on. "I don't see why I need keep back a little secret which does me no special good. When did I first see Inez? Let me see."

He had come back with his face softened somewhat, and had dropped into the chair.

"Inez is a waif," he went on. "I saw her one night wandering demented in Battery Park, and took her to my lodgings, where, the next

day, she was discovered by a man who took her off in a carriage. That was ten years ago. She was a child then, but the man who came after her seemed glad that he had found her again—but his joy was not that of love. I rather thought that he hated me for having sheltered the poor girl, who could tell me nothing about herself, and who, if I had not found her, would have wandered into the river. That is how I first met Inez. I have seen her ever since at intervals. I have noticed that she has grown to be very beautiful; that she became the companion of Madame Medusa, and that, by-and-by, Daniz crossed her path and she became that old hag's slave.

"There is good blood in the girl's veins," continued Jack. "It is better than yours or mine; on her mother's side I mean, Dan."

"Did you discover much about her past?"

"I think it is not much of a mystery to me."

"Then, she is of good lineage?"

"On her mother's side, I tell you. I don't go a snap on the blood she got from her father," cried Dunbar.

"She's got a temper," suggested Nicobar.

"From that same mother," was the reply.

"Does she remember you?"

"I don't think Inez forgets anything. She seems to remember that I saved her from the river, but beyond that she knows me not."

There was no answer for a moment.

"I don't want to see the girl fall into the hands of any of these clew-hunters," said Nicobar at last.

"Do you think she ought to be taken away?"

"She isn't safe where she is. Daniz is known to have sprung a trap on one of these ferrets and Inez is under her eye."

"Yes."

"Don't you think the girl should be taken off—out of the way for the present, at least?"

Jack Dunbar seemed to think deeply for a little while.

"No, let her stay. She has a still conscience," said he with a smile. "She can't be made to make a sign when she doesn't want to. The girl is secretive enough for all purposes."

"But her presence might be damaging to Major Phenix and his daughter."

At mention of these words the man at the table fell toward Dan Nicobar with a smart cry.

"Then she shall go!" he cried. "Inez shan't compromise the woman I love; but I don't exactly see how she could do that."

"Think," said Nicobar. "Think of the League. Daniz belongs to it. She is the guardian of Inez. Think for a moment of the killing of the witch of Gotham. Go back over the whole ground—go back some years. The dumb girl is a factor in this case, and sooner or later the ferrets will find the thread that unwinds the skein."

"My God!"

"Don't you see now? The girl is best out of the way. True, she can't talk, but these men of the trail are capable of anything. This one is doubly so."

"Kill him!"

Again the hand of Dunbar struck the table, shaking it until the two glasses on it rattled and nearly fell off.

"That is well enough so far as the suggestion goes. But it is not so easily done. He is as slippery as an eel, as strong as a tiger, and has the cunning of a fox."

"The very traits that make the successful man-hunter. I know something about this man. If you once cage Jason Clew you must lock the door with the dagger. Understand?"

Dan Nicobar smiled for he thought of the escape from the underground cell beneath Daniz's house, but he said nothing to Jack about the flight.

"Let me see. Whither can Inez be taken till the storm blows over?" he said, musingly. "By Jupiter! I know. The keenest ferret that runs a trail would not find her there. She goes tonight. The girl trusts me, Dan. I can take her anywhere and she will not object. I will throw this human bloodhound off the scent. Ha, why didn't I think of it before?"

CHAPTER XV.

DAN NICOBAR STRIKES A SNAG.

IT was the morning after Jason Clew's interview with Davy Sharp when the bell attached to the house occupied by Major Phenix rung for the twentieth time.

"That's another boy!" growled the major. "That's the twentieth rat who has come in answer to the call for a boy. One never gets just what he advertises for. The wrong boy always comes," and he went into the hall himself and opened the door.

Instead of sending the caller off with a growl, as he had dismissed nineteen previous ones, after a searching glance he held the door open and then asked the boy on the step to come in.

Davy Sharp slipped into the house and was escorted into the parlor.

"What's your name?"

"Dick Sampler."

"Want to become an inmate of this house, eh?"

"If I suit and the duties aren't too hard."

"I guess they won't undermine your constitu-

tion and send you to an early grave. You can read and write?"

"Unfortunately I can't do neither. I never had a chance to get a education, an'—"

"But you look smart."

"An average Sampler, I guess," said Davy. "I don't want to impose on you. I am an orphan, born of 'poor but honest parents,' as the reporters say—"

"We'll try you, Mr. Sampler," broke in Major Phenix, smiling.

He touched a bell on the table and Nydia, the maid, put in an appearance.

"See that this boy is washed and fed," he said. "I have secured him, the twentieth one that came and if any more come drive them off the steps."

"I just came in time, eh?" grinned Davy, going away with the tall, handsome girl who looked down at him with a smile of pity and contempt.

He was taken to the wash-room where Nydia pointed out the soap, and Davy taking up the first cake that came handy, turned to the maid with a grin:

"You have things handy here. It seems to me a feller would want ter be washin' all the time."

"Not if he stays in this house," was the answer.

"By the way, what am I expected ter do here?"

"I guess you're to help me as much as any one."

"Help you? What's yer name?"

"Nydia?"

"What does the boss do?"

"Not much of anything. He is a rich gentleman who retired some years ago and who don't have to do anything to make a living."

"No family?"

"There are but three of us in the house, the master, myself and Lorene?"

Davy, the young spy, fell to work with the towel, and in a few moments was taken into a small room, where he found a good breakfast waiting for him.

Nydia now left him, and while he ate he became aware that some one had stolen into the room.

Looking up and over his shoulder, he saw a beautiful young girl, who was watching him with a pleased smile on her open face.

"So you're the boy?" she said, moving forward.

"I'm Sampler," was the reply, "and from what I've heard you must be Miss Lorene."

"I am Lorene," said the beauty.

"Major Phenix's daughter, I presume?"

In a second the face of Lorene grew crimson, and then lost every vestige of red.

"I am called such, but as long as you live under this roof don't refer to me as such. If we are to be friends, and I hope we are to be such, do as I bid you. I am Lorene, but nothing more to you. Remember!"

"That's a starter," said the boy to himself, while he promised to obey the fair creature. "Jason prepared me for something sensational in this house, and I'm having it already."

Lorene fell back, and from the door looked at the boy as he enjoyed the best breakfast he had had in a long time.

When he had finished his meal he saw Major Phenix quit the house, and was alone with the two women.

Nydia showed him how to do some unimportant things in the rooms, and with some time on his hands he sauntered into the parlor, where he took a survey of the place.

An hour later he heard the front door open, and the next moment a man stood in the hall.

Nydia, who was standing near him at the time, suddenly grasped his arm.

"Go into the parlor and tell him that the major has gone out, and will not come back for a spell. Don't let him ask any questions nor set his eyes on you fairly, for he has the power of putting people under a spell."

"Jupiter, I hope not," said Davy, hurrying off, and in a moment he stood in the presence of the man who had walked into the house without the ceremony of knocking.

He found the new-comer seated in the arm-chair usually occupied by Major Phenix, and was in the act of lighting a cigar, like a privileged person.

He delivered Nydia's message, and from the first found the eyes of the man riveted upon him.

"I guess I'll wait," said the caller, crossing his legs. "The major and I are old friends. When did you become a part of the household?"

"This morning."

"How do you like the place?"

"I'm satisfied anywhere," said Davy, feeling that he was undergoing a terrible scrutiny.

"Well, if you behave yourself, you'll find this better than playing rat on the streets," smiled the man, and Davy, glad to go back to Nydia, withdrew and met the tall maid in the dining-room.

"Who is that man?" he asked, the moment he spied the girl.

"The son of Satan!" flashed Nydia. "I wish

I had a chance to order him out of the house never to come back any more."

"He comes often, then?"

"Whenever he chooses to come."

"What does he call himself?"

"Dan Nicobar, though men of his stamp have more names than one, and you will find some of them on the books of the prisons."

"Why, you don't like him, Nydia?"

The big girl colored and then bent downward till she almost touched Davy Sharp's face with her own. How her black eyes glittered!

"I like you already, boy. I want you to help me while you are in this house. I am here because of the beautiful girl up-stairs. If it wasn't for Lorene, I wouldn't stay a minute in this accursed house. I hate every person in it excepting Lorene and you. I am here because there is on foot a plot of some sort against Lorene. It is darker than you think. It is managed by the wretch now in the parlor and Major Phenix himself. Will you stand by me, Davy Sharp?"

Nydia must have seen the boy's eyes glisten with delight.

"You can count on me, Nydia," said Davy, touching her hand. "I don't like the rascal in the parlor. I happen to know something about him, and you may rely on me to help balk him in any game he undertakes." We are pards, Nydia—pards from this moment."

The big black eyes of the tall maid glowed again and when Dave Sharp saw her move away he felt that he was not to be alone in that house of plots.

Dan Nicobar continued to smoke in the parlor and the boy spy, approaching the door at intervals, saw him puffing away as if at peace with all the world.

This was the man whose comings to the house he had been told to watch. This was Dan Nicobar, the companion and right bower of Major Phenix, whose life had been a double one, for when he was not Phenix, he was Mutrie, the man who had dogged old Noah Moneybox's footsteps.

Lorene remained in her room up-stairs. The boy knew that Nydia had informed her of the visit of Nicobar, and thought that on this account she had refrained from coming down.

For two solid hours the cool man of the Silver Dagger occupied the seat in the parlor. When one cigar was exhausted he would light another; but at last he moved and went out into the hall.

Glancing up the steps which led to Lorene's rooms, he stood in the doorway as if half determined to ascend.

"What is it, sir?"

Dan Nicobar turned at the voice and stood face to face with Nydia, who had entered the hall.

He scowled, for there was no love between the two.

"Your mistress?" he said, swallowing his anger.

"She isn't coming down this morning," said Nydia.

Nicobar indulged in a cutting laugh.

The tall figure of the maid advanced a step. Strong as he was, he looked at the clinched hands of Nydia and shuddered.

"You can wait for Major Phenix in the parlor, but not in the hall," she said.

"You're very curt," he grinned.

"No insolence, sir. I want to say here, once for all, Dan Nicobar, that I don't like a single hair that grows on your head. If I had my way, that door would never open to you, and you would go back and serve out your last term."

The effect of these words was startling. Dan Nicobar, glaring at the maid like a thug baffled by some hand, fell back into the room and looked.

"By George! if I ran things here you'd be pitched into the street!" he hoarsely cried. "I never saw anything like this in a servant. I would send you back to the shanty where you were schooled in effrontery—"

His sentence was broken by the almost tiger leap across the doorstep of the tall maid.

Before he could meet her attack he was seized by the hands of Nydia and forced back over the velvet carpet.

"Sit down and wait like a man, or quit the house," she cried, at the same time throwing him into a chair. "I won't take any insolence from a gallows-bird like you, and if you don't like this house and its employees, you know where the door is, my Sing Sing parrot."

Nicobar was only too glad when the hands were withdrawn, and for some time after Nydia's departure he sat in momentary fear of her coming back.

"Claws under the velvet!" he said, under his breath. "If I had this house, she shouldn't remain a moment. What did she call me toward the end? A Sing Sing parrot, eh? I wonder where she ever heard anything of my history?"

But Nydia didn't come back to disturb him. She went back to grinning Davy Sharp, who had witnessed the whole scene and who laughed outright when she came up.

"I could have shaken him out of his boots," said Nydia. "Some day I will get another chance at him; then look out!"

"I was ready to help, but I saw that you were mistress of the situation. You're too much for that rascal, Nydia."

The tall maid smiled.

"I wish he had resisted, Davy. I just wanted to shake him up a little, she said."

CHAPTER XVI.

A SECRET IS LEFT UNTOLD.

THE thrilling pantomime which the Silk-handed Ferret had witnessed in the house of magic did not leave him.

The sight of Inez plunging the dagger into the back of the chair, as if it were the heart of Madame Medusa, were enough to give him new and startling thoughts.

The girl had disappeared so mysteriously that he did not try to track her for he knew that the house was one of many secret doors and corridors.

But he had determined to get at the past history of the girl, if possible, to find out where she had sprung from, for what he had seen in the old house puzzled and mystified him beyond measure.

He had no doubt that Madame Medusa had been murdered in the manner he had seen, that the assassin had stolen upon her just as Inez had done upon the chair and that dagger had been wielded by a hand as sure as the dumb girl's.

With Davy Sharp in the house occupied by Major Phenix, the nabob of M—street, the detective was left to take another trail and he was soon after the new information.

It was not his intention to go back to the home of Daniz, the Dago. He had escaped from one of his underground traps and would have had the hag upon him the moment he crossed the threshold. There was another cue to work and he went at it.

Davy, as we have seen, had discovered the new abode of Noah Moneybox, the miser-banker, and Jason knew that an attempt had been made to obtain from him something about the wife of Major Phenix.

The detective under cover of night bent his steps toward old Noah's den.

Climbing the stairs he was about to rap when he was startled by voices on the inside and the next moment he stood near the portal listening with all his might.

But all he caught was a confused hum that gave him no clew to the identity of those beyond the door.

It was exasperating, and he was forced to withdraw for fear of being caught on the trail.

Down on the street he waited for Noah's visitor to come out and the moment the man emerged from the house he was spotted.

"Ho!" said the detective. "You, is it? What brings you of all men to the home of the old money-shark? You're not playing Mutrie now, but show up in the character by which you are best known. I don't want you, Major Phenix. My business is with the man you have just left."

He went back up the stairs and rapped.

There was no answer, and lifting the latch, he pushed open the door.

The room beyond was dark.

"Hello, Noah!" called Jason Clew. "You have a visitor, so strike a light, if you please."

Silence still.

The ferret of New York drew a match over the rough surface of wall and saw by the light of the little flame as it leaped into being that he was the sole occupant of the room.

There were signs of a hasty exit, as if the visit of Major Phenix had been immediately followed by flight.

Old Noah was gone!

For a few moments the man of clews stood with the burning match in his hand and then threw it to the floor.

At the window that looked down upon a roof at one side of the house he lighted another match and held it out over the sill.

"This is the track he took," he said to himself. "The old man has fled from the Silver Dagger. Noah Moneybox has decamped, fearing the needle point that found the heart of Madame Medusa, the witch of New York. He was afraid to go down the front way. Major Phenix might be on the watch, and so he risked his limbs by another route."

Jason Clew drew back and went down.

There was no doubt of old Noah's flight. He had fled from the man who exerted a strange and dark influence over him—the man who, as Mutrie, had tracked him time and again as discovered by Davy Sharp. But would flight save him? Would running away keep him from the Silver Dagger? Jason shook his head when he thought of this.

Down on the street there was no sign of Noah Moneybox.

The detective hardly knew where to look for the old man. He would not go to Daniz, nor would he seek either Nicobar or Jack Dunbar.

"Old Noah will go where he is not likely to be found," said the ferret. "We must not look for him where the League would. He

carries in his bosom, no matter what he has been, one of the very secrets I want."

Jason Clew hurried off and went down into another quarter of the city.

Since taking up the trail of the Silver Dagger he had contrived to pick up a few bits of information concerning old Noah. True, these were not much, but they were something and he thought might lead to more when he should go back to them.

He dodged into an alley and pulled up at a dilapidated house, the door of which was suddenly bolted the moment his footsteps were heard.

"I was here at the opening of the game. I found in this house a man who knew Noah Moneybox, but who did not want to tell me much about him the moment he thought I was a detective. Now, I will see what he will say at this stage of the game."

Jason knocked and a voice came to the door. "I've shut up for the night."

"Not to me," said the detective.

"To everybody."

"For God's sake, don't let him in!" wailed another voice, the tone of which startled the ferret.

"Found!" he exclaimed.

A moment's silence followed.

"I am coming in," said Clew, sternly. "Do you want a door to mend?"

"No."

Then the voice was lowered.

"Under the bed, quick!" it said, and two minutes later the low portal was swung wide, and the human bloodhound stepped into the dirty apartment.

It was almost bare of furniture, and what little there was was poor enough.

A bed stood in one corner, and the bed clothes that covered it were slightly disarranged, for they hung nearly to the floor.

"What is it?" asked the man, glaring at Jason.

"I want to talk with your visitor."

"But I have none."

"Are you sure of it?"

"Before Heaven—"

"Come! Don't put yourself on record. This is the man I want to see," and Jason lifted the coverlet and revealed the shoes of a man under the bed.

Noah Moneybox crawled out and dropped white-faced into a chair.

"You ran away from the major, eh?" said Jason.

The answer was a blank stare.

"You made a good drop from the window for one of your age. It is a wonder though that you would take the risk—"

"I would do anything to escape from that man."

The confession was one which old Noah seemed to instantly regret.

"I don't mean what I said," he went on. "I am not myself since I found Madame Medusa dead in the chair."

"I understand. It unnerved you, Noah. But come, I want to talk about that very thing for a moment."

The miser-banker looked at the man who had admitted the detective, and he withdrew.

"Why should the girl kill the fortune-teller?" asked Jason Clew.

In an instant a singular look came into the old man's eye.

He bent forward and changed color, then rubbed his hands together and gazed half-vacantly at the ferret.

"Yes, why should she do it?" he said.

"Was it because she grew to hate the woman who taught her something about the art she practiced?"

"I don't know. Why should she kill her?"

Noah Moneybox was talking half to himself, and the detective saw that he appeared but half awake.

Was the old man under the influence of some drug?

"Inez came often to Medusa's house, didn't she?" he queried.

The man in the chair started as if a serpent had hissed on the floor at his feet.

"Inez?" he cried, the name seeming a startling revelation. "Inez? Ah! I remember—the girl with the missing tongue. Yes, she came often to see—"

He checked himself and passed his hand across his leathery face.

Old Noah was fast sinking under the effects of some mysterious power.

"Go on!" cried the detective, rousing him.

"I want to have you finish what you've begun. The girl, Inez, came to see Medusa. I want to know why she should kill her?"

"Ha, yes, yes, why—she—should—kill—her," stammering repeated the old usurer.

His eyes seemed to be losing their vivacity. They had a glassy stare which could not escape the detective of Gotham.

"Finish your sentence, I say," and Jason shook the man till his teeth chattered.

"Inez—yes— She came to see Medusa. She used to stay with her a long time and I don't blame her, seeing who the old fortune-teller was."

These words came from the old man with a prodigious effort. It seemed to tax his strength beyond endurance.

The next moment he fell forward in a stupor. "Who was Medusa?" cried the detective, catching him.

Old Noah made a final effort.

"She—was—she—"

The voice died away in a sigh and all was still.

"Gods! he is dead!" said Jason Clew.

It was true. Noah Moneybox was safe from the Silver Dagger.

CHAPTER XVII.

CLEW OR MYSTERY?—WHICH?

WHEN Jason Clew, the ferret, emerged from that hovel with the dead behind, it seemed that the trail on the Silver Dagger had taken on new mystery.

Old Noah, under the influence of some secret agent of death, had died with a secret almost spoken, but still it was as silent as though the first part of it had never been heard.

Who was Madame Medusa?

The detective went back and recalled all he had ever heard about the murdered queen of magic.

He remembered that some had said that she had once been a noted woman across the sea—that her beauty was the theme for song in a royal court, but that, fleeing with a lover, she had come to America to plunge into the black art and to become finally, with age upon her and her beauty faded, Madame Medusa—under which name she had perished by the Silver Dagger.

Inez was now the ferret's game.

He went back to his little room and looked over a paper which he had found next old Noah's heart, but it gave him nothing for his trouble. It was nothing but a memoranda of several small loans and he threw it aside in disgust.

To find Inez, the mute, he believed he would have to again invade Daniz's den; but would not the old hag quit the spot when she should be released from the trap of her own setting? Would she not get out of the city and take the girl with her?

Carefully disguised and alone, the cool-headed detective of the metropolis entered that part of the city where towered the house inhabited by the female Dago.

In due time he reached the house and found the door, seldom shut, wide open.

The hour was not very late, and he passed the trap, looking up at its numerous windows, as if in search of a face that did not materialize.

That Inez was somewhere in the house, watched by Daniz, he did not doubt. That she would not be given over to him without a desperate struggle he was equally certain, and when he came back, having seen nothing of the faces for which he was on the alert, he boldly entered the house as though he were one of its old tenants.

Nobody seemed to notice him. Several passed him as he crossed the dangerous threshold, but not one gave him a second glance.

Jason Clew went up-stairs with a pair of keen, watchful eyes in his head.

This time he had come back prepared for a struggle with any opposing power.

He went up the poor steps to the floor on which he expected to strike the dumb girl's trail, if it was to be struck at all in that house.

There were a few lights in the trap, but there was lots of noise.

Jason Clew had been to such places before, and knew the general interior of the human beehives of Gotham.

The old house was large, and a perfect network of hallways. Some of these were almost as dark as the alleys of the "dark quarter;" but he threaded the maze, and at last stood where he expected to find out something.

The detective argued that a girl like Inez could not live in the house without being known more or less to every inmate, and he intended to strike her trail by a bit of inquiry in the right place.

A door opened almost at his elbow, and he turned to see a woman gazing at him with an expression of bewilderment.

"I fear I have missed the room I want," said the ferret. "I am looking for the dumb girl."

"For Inez?"

"Yes."

The woman pointed toward a door just visible at the end of the narrow corridor and the ferret bowed.

"Will I find her alone?" he asked.

"I don't know. She slips out whenever she can—whenever that old tigress back yonder takes her eyes off of her. Do you know Inez?"

"A little."

"A strange girl! Sometimes I believe she can talk. I am almost sure I heard her one night."

"But she is a mute," said Jason quickly.

"I know that's what they say," and the speaker backed up against the jamb and looked most curiously into the detective's face. "I've had a pretty story told me by the tigress over there!"

"Is that her den?"

"Den? You hit the nail on the head that time. Her den? That is just what it is."

"Is she at home?"

"If the girl is, she's likely to be."

Jason Clew looked toward the door which led into Daniz's room with a smile.

"Wait till I see," the woman went on. "I'll tell you directly."

She slid over to the door and catching the top of it with both hands drew herself up and looked over the transom.

"The nest is empty," she called, looking back over her shoulder.

"Empty?"

The word thrilled the detective.

"Heavens! have I come too late?" and he sprang not toward old Daniz's room, but down the corridor and seized the knob of the door at the end of it.

The door opened and he went in.

"Gone!" he cried. "The bird has flown. The old hag has outwitted me."

"What is it, sir?" cried a voice behind him, and he saw the woman who had dropped from Daniz's door, rush into the apartment. "Ah, I see! The girl is gone too."

Jason Clew could not reply for a second. The discovery seemed to unnerve him.

"They went like a couple of snowflakes," continued the woman. "I am a pretty good listener, but they slipped out without my hearing them. Of course the mute went with the old one. She wouldn't go off without her, for she watched her like a hawk, though sometimes I've known Inez to go out when she did not know it, and I wasn't going to say anything about the stolen holiday."

Jason turned on the gas near one of the walls and looked around the room, which as he could see at a glance had been vacated by its last occupant. There was a bed in one corner and two chairs with a little desk of the cheapest pattern stood near by.

This was all the furniture Inez had ever had. It was enough for her simple wants and she had lived there under old Daniz's eye excepting when she stole out and—made deeper the mystery of the crime of the Silver Dagger.

Before the detective knew it he found himself alone in the room, the woman having slipped out, as though she was not interested in the flight of the pair. He closed the door and went up to the wall near the jet.

Here and there were some pencilings, the work of former tenants, singular names and a verse or two of doggerel, as if the writers were inclined to humor.

But fresher than all the rest and not blackened by the smoke of the gas, was a line which riveted the man-hunter's attention.

He bent forward with his eyes ablaze and, holding his breath, as though to breathe would be to obliterate the writing on the wall, he read the following:

"June 10th.—I must never forget the time nor the hour. It was eleven o'clock! INEZ."

Jason Clew read the line over and over.

"This seems to complete the evidence of the horrid pantomime," he muttered. "It was on the night of the 10th of June that the dagger found Madame Medusa's heart and Inez has fixed the very hour."

He returned to the words on the wall and then looked for more. But not another line which he could attribute to the mute girl rewarded his search, though he looked high and low and carefully read all the wretched scrawls on the plastering.

The one inscription was almost enough. The detective photographed it on his brain and at last turned away.

The confession was there, but Inez was gone. The hand which had traced the line on the wall had slipped away and the mute girl was still under the hag's eyes.

He went into the hallway and looked toward Daniz's apartment.

Did any discovery await him there?

He went to the door to find it locked and after a few ineffectual attempts to get in, he desisted and went down-stairs.

Suddenly on the second flight he stopped and looked over the balustrade at the figure of a man which had just come in from the street.

Major Phenix!

There was no mistaking the contour of the figure below him even if he had not seen the face.

The nabob of M— street stood in the shadows as if waiting for some one. He had pulled his hat over his brow, but that was not enough to disguise him from the keen eyes of the detective.

"Is he Phenix or Mutrie to-night?" Jason asked himself. "I know he will never again track old Noah. The miser-banker is out of his way now and Dan Nicobar won't rob him again for his master. Ah, which way, major?"

Major Phenix had taken a notion to come upstairs.

As if tired of waiting for the person wanted, he was already ascending the steps and the ferret of New York, with a singular smile at his mouth, was quietly watching him much after the manner of a panther waiting for the fawn approaching the ambush.

The nabob came on oblivious of the silent espionage; he climbed the creaking steps until he had nearly reached the man on the watch.

Jason Clew was leaning against the wall at its darkest point. His body was slightly bent forward as if ready to throw its weight upon the nabob; but just now something startling happened.

There were but two steps between the nabob and the ferret when the unexpected took place.

Major Phenix stopped and looked up, but not along the wall.

"I won't go up," he said. "There are those in this house to whom I want to remain unseen. I should not have come thus far. Daniz can be communicated with through Dan, and I will go back. No; I will write her a line. I can do it in the dark."

He took a little memorandum from an inner pocket, and bending toward the wall, almost within touch of the very man he would not have encountered for the world, he began to write on one of the blank leaves.

"Dan told me about the crack in the wall. Ah, here it is—a pretty neat post-office!" he said, and the next moment he had crammed into a crack in the wall the paper he had torn from the book.

His hand was not an inch from the detective's head when he deposited the note, and the following instant he had turned and was moving down the flight.

"A thousand thanks for the cleverness of the rookery post-office," smiled the ferret of Gotham, his fingers tearing from its hiding-place the note just written. "What is this?—clew or more mystery?"

He clutched the paper until he was on the street, and under the first lamp.

"It is clew!" he exclaimed. "Major Phenix, this isn't a calcium light, but it is a ray on a dark spot." and he thrust the paper into his pocket.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRUMPING OF AN ACE.

"How do you like it?"

The man who gave utterance to this question had his answer in a look.

If the tongue of the person whom he addressed could have spoken, he might have been answered differently, but the eyes of the person before him had watched the movement of his lips, and he knew he had been understood.

Jack Dunbar sat in a poorly-furnished room, and heard the clock on the same square striking ten.

His companion was a beautiful girl, whose face bore a look of sadness. It was Inez.

"You can read my lips every time. I know that, girl," he went on, still eyed by the mute. "You are in danger, and I have brought you to this place till it has passed. You are not to go out without my consent, for a foot beyond this door may mean death."

Inez nodded.

"It is danger of the darkest kind. You have been tracked, and that by one who means harm. You have never caught me in a lie, Inez?"

The girl shook her head.

The next moment she caught up a bit of paper which lay on the table between them, and began to write.

"I am willing to obey you because you have brought me up from that house where I was watched like a hawk," he read, when she handed him the sheet.

"That is right. I have taken you from the keen eyes of that woman in yellow—old Daniz. She will hunt for you, but as long as you remain here she will be baffled."

Inez smiled her thanks, but wrote them as well on the paper.

"Will this last long?" her pencil said.

"No. I am going to throw the trailers off the track—"

"Then, there are more than one?"

"Yes. Daniz has friends, you know."

The mute girl looked at him a long time without moving.

"I'm going now, continued Jack, rising and crossing the room. "I sha'n't be gone long."

She was at his side and one of her hands fell softly upon his shoulder.

Did Inez love this man? Was her heart in the keeping of the wretch who belonged to the Silver Dagger and who had brought her to the new retreat, not for her own good, but to insure the safety of himself, if not to carry out a deep-laid plan of his own?

"What is it?" he said, with a grin.

She led him back to the table and leaned over the paper lying there.

Taking the pencil once more in her hand, she wrote:

"I will kill the first one who finds me!"

There was a gleam of fire in the depths of her dark eyes when she looked up and encountered the man's gaze.

"By Jove! I believe you will," he exclaimed.

"Well, you can't go amiss very far."

Just then he thought of Jason Clew, and quick as a flash he had caught Inez's arm and was bending toward her.

"Be on your guard! You are hunted by a man spy—a man who is as dangerous as Daniz.

Look out for him. What is he like? Well, that is rather hard to tell, as he is a person of disguises. He is a detective. Ah, you know every word I say, I see. Look out for this man. If he finds you, there's no telling what might happen, not only to yourself but to me, your friend."

The hand of the dumb girl fell once more to the paper.

"I will be on my guard. I will watch for this detective, and if he comes I will kill him!"

Jack Dunbar smiled at this, and bade Inez good-night.

"She is as pretty as Lorene, but she is too still for me; and, then, she isn't worth fighting for. I have a fortune when I get the major's *protegee*. I know what I'm after. I wish Jason Clew would come prowling round the house. Inez has the right sort of blood in her veins. No one has the power over her that I have. She hates and fears Daniz; she trembles in Major Phenix's presence, but she was bold enough to snatch the papers from him in the witch's house. What if she loves me? What if she loves me as she hates others? Oh, I guess I can handle Inez, the mute."

Jack Dunbar went over to another quarter of New York.

He got into a suit of clothes in a small apartment, the closets of which seemed to hold his own wardrobe, and an hour later he knocked at Major Phenix's door.

Perhaps he would not have deferred his visit until such a late hour if he had not seen a light in the front room.

When he was admitted to the house by Major Phenix himself, he looked into the astonished countenance of the nabob of M— street, and walked into the parlor.

"You drop in at odd intervals of late," said the major.

"Yes. When I come it is always on business, isn't it?"

"That is true."

"Any orders?"

Jack had taken a cigar from the ready box on the table, and proceeded to light it.

Before he spoke again, Major Phenix fell back in his chair and appeared to study the face of the man before him.

"Do you know what the chief ferret thinks?" suddenly said Jack.

"No."

"Well, he thinks *she* did it."

A moment of dead silence fell between the pair.

"That's just what he thinks, and when you come to look at it from his standpoint, it looks reasonable."

"I can't say that I understand you," said Major Phenix.

Jack sent a swift glance toward the hall.

"There are no spies in this house," said the nabob, interpreting the glance.

"Then, by Jove, you're lucky. I say that he—Jason Clew—thinks the girl did the job."

"Inez?"

"Inez."

"How did you get this news? He hasn't made you his confidant?"

"No and I wouldn't accept the position if he proposed it," laughed Dunbar. "I have a way of getting at some things that I don't care to reveal; but now I am on familiar ground. Think of it. She used to go to the house often—would slip away from Daniz and the rest of them, and Medusa took quite a fancy to her. Then, I have seen some queer actions in the house and maybe the bloodhound has seen them, too. I shouldn't wonder in the least."

"What have you seen?"

"Why, I've seen her slip into the old house with the stealth of a pantheress and drive a dagger into the back of the witch's chair."

Major Phenix was staring at Jack.

"She did it so real like, that one would almost swear that she was the murderess."

"Perhaps she was."

"I begin to think she has convinced the detective. That is something. The next thing he will do will be to discover why she should want to kill Madame Medusa."

"Would that be hard to do?"

"Not for that man," said Dunbar. "You know the temper she has? It almost sets her blood on fire."

"Where is Inez?"

Jack did not betray himself.

"Isn't she in the house watched by Daniz?" he asked.

"She ought to be. But let us come back to what you say the detective believes. If he has gone to the house he may have found Inez there, and have witnessed the pantomime you have seen."

"You know all about the secret doors there."

An involuntary curse dropped from Major Phenix's lips.

"I have cause for remembering them," he said.

"I should say so from what I saw from the transom," thought Jack.

"In case of Inez's arrest what would follow?"

"Her conviction. Jason Clew never arrests until he has woven a net of evidence around his victim."

"I have heard this before."

"But have you any orders, or do you give them all to Dan now?"

Major Phenix opened a drawer at his elbow and took a package of papers from it glancing at it roll ere he laid it on the table.

"No, I have no orders," he corrected himself, replacing the packet.

"How is old Noah coming on?"

"The old scamp is still playing spider—sucking the golden blood of mankind."

"Are you sure of that, major?"

The eyes of the two men met.

"He was engaged in that, to him, congenial task when I saw him last," the nabob said.

"He starts at a shadow."

"It was a mistake ever to take him into the League."

"He has paid the League back for its trouble."

"By hard scratching. He would loan the League no money only when it held the Silver Dagger over his head. I got tired of doing that."

"Then you may be the man who sucked the golden heifer dry," laughed Major Phenix.

"I had my inning, of course. What was the old man good for but our convenience? He refused to be bled when he discovered that we never tickled him with the dagger's point. It was old Noah who discovered Madame Medusa dead in her house. You know that now."

"Yes, curse him! We know who set the Silk-handed Ferret on the trail."

The face of the nabob grew dark.

"He told me one of his few great secrets," said Jack, watching the major with the eye of a lynx.

"When?"

"Last night. It took a good deal of slick playing on my part, but I got it."

There was no answer. It seemed to Major Phenix that the man before him had brought the conversation to the very point at which he had been aiming all along.

Jack's voice seemed to have changed. At any rate, there was an eagerness in his eye which was not there before. He cast a swift look toward the door leading into the hall and seeing it closed looked back at Major Phenix.

"I think it time for me to mention the matter nearest my heart," he said. "I have been intending to do this for some time, but to-night I am going to be plain and fair. Major, I love the beautiful Lorene—the girl who is under your protection. I intend to tell her as much; but I shall make my love known first to you. She is in your hands and your will is law to her. You know what I know—you are aware that your future welfare is in the keeping of Jack Dunbar, of the Silver Dagger. You know that you are safe in my hands while you are disposed to keep the oath of the code for there is no more loyal person than me. Say to-night that the girl shall become my wife when I come for her and—"

With the face of a fiend Major Phenix was leaning toward the thug, looking him in the eye with a glare that seemed to pierce him through.

"Finish your sentence," he said.

"There is nothing more to add. You understand me. I want the girl. I am to become the husband of Lorene."

"You are?"

"Yes."

The rollers of the major's chair moved noiselessly across the carpet, and he was beyond reach of Jack Dunbar's hand when he stopped.

"Shall I call Lorene down?" he said, quietly. "I don't think she has retired. I heard her up awhile ago."

If Major Phenix was cool, he had his match in the man before him.

"Yes, call her down," said Jack.

The nabob of M— street left his chair and crossed the room toward the hall.

"It was a bold play, but it won," Dunbar thought, as he grinned. "I told Nicobar that I would get the girl. Major Phenix knows too much to refuse me. The girl arrested for the crime of the witch's mansion! I guess that would delight him. But what is he going to do?"

At this juncture Major Phenix turned and came back to the table.

As he dropped back into the chair his hand came up over the cloth, and the following instant the bulging eyes of Jack Dunbar were looking into the muzzle of a revolver.

"Lift a hand or utter a sound, and I will blot the carpet and the table with your brains!" came slowly over the gleaming barrel.

The villain grew red and white by turns. The eye behind the leveled weapon looked as deadly as the six-shooter itself.

"He's trumped my ace!" said Jack.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GUTTER FERRET'S REPORT.

It seemed as if Inez, the mute, was completely in the hands of the cool rascal known as Jack Dunbar.

He possessed over the girl a power which she did not seem capable of resisting, and when he told her that it was necessary for her own

safety that she accompany him to the house where we have just seen her domiciled, she went without a murmur.

Jason Clew did not suspect that he, and not old Daniz, had taken Inez away. The detective was inclined to the belief that the Dago was the cause of the girl's removal from the rookery, where he read the writing on the wall, but he was to discover his mistake in a startling manner.

A few hours after his exit from the house he was led to watch a figure which suddenly crossed his path on the street. There was a certain familiarity about the movement that excited his suspicions, and in a little while he made the discovery that he was at Daniz's heels.

To follow the female Dago the detective thought would be to find the person he wanted to run down, and he at once gave chase.

There was a celerity and quickness about the old hag's movements that kept the ferret's excitement at a high pitch, and when she drew near the river, and, after looking back, as if more than half suspicious that she was followed, plunged into a ruinous-looking building, he was near at hand.

Of late he had come to believe that Daniz knew a good deal concerning the silver dagger—that she had secrets which, if he could get them, would go far toward unraveling the mysteries of Madame Medusa's last moments, and he had resolved to follow the old woman through thick and thin.

Daniz, by entering the old house, had not got rid of the cool ferret, who allowed nothing to balk him.

He was not aware who inhabited the building, if any one besides Daniz herself, and when he saw her vanish beyond the door, his course was plain before him.

Jason Clew effected an entrance into the basement of the trap and crouched in the darkness that reigned there, with his ears on the strain and ready for anything that might occur.

"I must find the mute girl. She is an important factor in this case," he said, while he waited amid dead silence. "She knows more than she would care to tell. Indeed, the secret of the Silver Dagger is in Inez's keeping."

For some time not a sound rewarded him, and then the opening and closing of a door somewhere in the house fell upon his ears.

"The trap is inhabited, anyhow," he went on, addressing himself as before.

He had examined the room as best he could in the dark, finding it nearly square and with but one door, the one by which he had entered.

After awhile he heard another sound, which was not made by a portal.

It seemed to emanate from the chamber beyond the wall against which he was leaning.

"You keep your promises to the letter—better than you used to," said the voice, which was that of a woman.

"You are a little sarcastic, but I don't care. What have you done with the girl?"

"Don't ask me. She slipped off from me, and Heaven knows what became of her."

"What, gone again? Don't you know that she may one of these days fall into the hands of the ferrets?"

"I am aware of that."

"Then, why don't you watch her?"

"I can't have an eye in the back of my head," was the reply, spoken with some tartness.

"She must be run down, and that as speedily as possible. Inez is too dangerous to be let run at large."

"I know that."

The last voice was very irritating.

"How are you getting along with your little scheme?" it went on.

"I am playing the best I can."

"What does he say? Is he willing to give the girl over to you?"

"Look at this."

It was evident to the listening detective on the dark side of the wall that the speaker was showing his companion an important paper of some kind, and he would have given much to have been able to look into the chamber.

"That's a fair bargain," said the woman's voice. "You have him fast. He signed that?"

"Certainly. Major Phenix signed it in my presence. I am to have the beautiful Lorene. My part of the agreement has been carried out. I have delivered into his hands the sum he wanted to borrow from Noah Moneybox."

"What does the girl say?"

"She objects."

"A lover, eh?"

"Yes. The young man who was in the trap with Jason Clew."

"Oh!" laughed a voice which the detective felt belonged to the woman he had tracked to the house.

"Why don't you claim her?" she asked.

"Not just now. I want to throw down another card."

"Why don't you play it? Don't you know that delays are dangerous?"

"I know. We must find the girl first—we must get Inez with her secret back in our power."

"Easier said than done perhaps," laughed old Daniz.

"You know the haunts of your race in this city. You ought to know where the girl would be likely to hide."

There was no reply.

"See here," the voice all along had sounded strangely like Dan Nicobar's. "If we fail—if the ferret—there is really but one in this game, and you know who he is—if he strikes the right trail, there will be some quick work and we may never get to divide."

"He need never find the clew. He don't have to solve the mystery of Madame Medusa's house."

"True; but don't let him get a grip on the mute girl. He has a hand of silk, but it can hold like a vise of steel."

It seemed to the detective that a low, fiendish laugh came through the wall.

"You have had him twice in your clutches—twice, I say, yet what has been the result?"

"Escape."

"Exactly. He is hard to hold."

"There must be no more of this," said Nicobar.

"Then, spring a trap of your own."

"By heavens! I believe I will. I can hold him. I can break the trail of this clew-hunter of Gotham."

"It is yours; break it."

The voices ceased as suddenly as they had begun and though the detective continued to listen, he did not hear them any more.

Again the unseen door opened and closed as before and the old house was still again.

Half an hour later he slipped into the street and started off.

Did he know that he had a spy at his heels?—that his exit had been observed—that a shadow as noiseless as ever a shadow was, was gliding after him from the very precincts of the house, and that he was seen every step he took—watched by a pair of eyes in which were mingled hatred and deep cunning?

Jason Clew brought up in front of the building in which was situated his little den and in a few moments he was alone in the room.

He thought it was about time for a report from Davy Sharp the young spy he had sent to Major Phenix's house. What had the street Arab discovered? Had he found out anything worth reporting? Or, had his identity become known and, in consequence of the exposure, had he fallen into clutches of the Dagger?

He was thinking about the boy when a rap sounded on the door and opening it the detective's pard stood before him.

There was a grin on Davy Sharp's face and his black eyes fairly sparkled.

He crossed the room and fell into a chair at the table, across which he looked into Jason's face.

"I'm having a picnic," smiled Davy. "I've had the pleasure of seeing the major trump a fellow's ace with a revolver."

"At home?"

"At home—in the parlor. They called him Jack and he thought he held a kerd that couldn't be trumped at all, but the major was too much for him."

"What did he do?"

The boy leaned his chin on his hand and went on:

"Jack wanted the girl, you see."

"Lorene?"

"Yes—thought he was entitled to her because of what he knew against the major. I was on the stair all the time, taking in the show over the transom. When Jack had showed his hand, all at once a six-shooter comes up over the edge of the table and looks Mr. Jack rather unexpectedly in the face. It was so sudden that he lost color and didn't move for ten minutes."

"Well?"

"I fully expected ter see the major carry out his threat ter blur the carpet with the contents of Jack's head—which would have spoiled the whole of it—and must say that I was disagreeably disappointed. For a little while Jack sot there, looking inter the muzzle of the revolver, when he came to the conclusion that he would compromise the case, which he did."

"What! did he agree to take back his demand on the nabob of M—street?"

"It was that or death," grinned the boy. "You see it was that or a bullet in his head, fer if there was 'shoot' in any man's eye, it was in the major's."

"How did it end?"

"Major Phenix leaned across the table with the devil in his eye and his hand on the trigger, and said about ten words which I didn't ketch. They seemed ter be all that was needed for the purpose, for Jack Dunbar, without another word, arose and walked out. In the hall, however, he stopped and looked toward the parlor where the major sat in his chair and for a moment his eyes blazed, but he said never a word. I guess he thought there was no need of it, for he probably guessed that there was another pistol trump in the hands of the man in the big room."

"What did the major do after Jack left?" asked Jason Clew.

"Oh, he sat there awhile longer, grinning like a master devil and sometimes looking at the por-

trait of the handsome woman that hangs on the wall—the picture which Nydia tells me is supposed to be that of Miss Lorene's mother."

"Supposed to be? Don't they think it is her mother?"

"No. I couldn't help giving myself away to both Nydia and Lorene—that is to a certain extent I couldn't. We understand one another. I think the partnership will help us."

There was no reply by the detective for a moment.

"Have you discovered nothing else?" he asked, at length.

"I picked up this bit of paper in the house," and the brown hand of the boy ferret drew from his pocket a piece of yellowish paper which he shoved across the table.

"I found it in the parlor under the major's table."

Jason Clew looked at it a moment and then at his young friend.

"Did you show it to either Lorene or Nydia?"

"I did not."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Not exactly, but something told me that it was important as everything I see in that house may turn out to be."

Jason Clew drew forth the message he had taken from the crack on the stair of the house formerly occupied by Daniz and laid the two bits of paper together.

Davy Sharp watched him with the eye of a young fox and seemed to wonder what connection existed between them.

"Shall I go back?" he asked.

"Do you want to go?"

"I rather like the tall maid. It did me good to see her shake Dan Nicobar. I thought she was going to rattle his teeth out, and when he was dropped into the chair and never said a word, I had a notion to applaud her."

"Go back," said the ferret. "I don't think you will be needed very long in the major's house."

"What, have you found a certain clew?"

The detective smiled.

"I believe the last few hours have thrown considerable light on this dark mystery."

"On the death of Madame Medusa?"

"Yes, Davy. Not only on that crime, but on another."

"We're working in harmony, I see, so I'll go back."

CHAPTER XX.

DAVY SHARP'S HORROR.

THE visit to the house near the river by the Silk-handed Ferret gave him one important piece of information and that was that Inez had not been taken away by Daniz.

If Dan Nicobar knew that the girl had been hidden by John Dunbar he refrained from imparting this bit of news to the old hag, and Daniz was thus left in the dark.

Inez might be a great deal more than a missing witness, for had not the ferret witnessed the thrilling pantomime of the witch's house where the mute girl plunged the dagger into the chair as if a heart was there?

If the girl knew nothing about the murder of the fortune-teller why had she sought the house and given her unseen watcher such an example of tigerishness?

Not only had he to look elsewhere for Inez, but from what he had overheard he was to look out for his own safety, for Dan Nicobar had promised Daniz to spring a trap on the detective and to get him out of the way. There was to be no failure this time—no getting out of the trap into which he intended to throw him; for Nicobar of Silver Dagger knew the persistency and success of the man of many clews.

Davy Sharp, the boy spy, went back to Major Phenix's house.

He crept in and sought the bed he had in one of the upper back rooms and turned in.

Confident that his absence had not been discovered, he soon dropped into a sound sleep.

All at once he became aware that he was sitting bolt upright in bed listening with all ears. Something had awakened him, but what?

Presently the door of the room opened and there stood in the dim light of the gas he kept burning the figure of a man.

The detective's spy made no move, but looked at the man and saw the dark face of Dan Nicobar.

The man stood there for a little while, when he shut the door and moved forward on tip-toe.

Davy's clothes hung on a chair near the couch and he saw Nicobar bend over them and run his hands into the pockets, as if in search of something.

He had all the movements of a successful thief and the sight of him going through his clothes seemed to paralyze the boy.

"I thought I would find it," said Dan in audible tones and a look at the bed down into which the boy had slyly slid without noise. "He must have found it for it was lost in the parlor and I don't think anybody else picked it up."

"You are right, Mr. Nicobar, I am the chap what found the bit of paper, and if you want it you will have to go to Jason Clew who has it in his keep just now. You won't find it in

my clothes so don't waste no time in going through 'em."

Nicobar gave over his search so suddenly that the watchful boy nearly let out an exclamation of surprise.

He turned full toward the couch and seemed on the eve of springing upon him.

But the next moment he had opened the door and was gone.

"That's a cool piece of work," said Davy, leaping up and running to the door half-dressed. "I wonder if the major knows that he is sneaking about the house at this time of night?"

Davy Sharp slid into his pantaloons and opened the door. There was a man on the stairs.

He saw Dan Nicobar gliding down the steps and noticed that he opened the door of the parlor and slipped inside.

This was quite enough to arouse the curiosity of the detective's young partner. He left his place and went below.

A light had been struck in the lower room, proof enough in his mind that Major Phenix was unaware of the nocturnal visit.

Davy Sharp listened at the door and heard the unlocking of a desk—the one which stood in one corner of the parlor and where he had on several occasions since entering the house seen the major writing when alone.

The man to whom the beautiful Lorene had been sold, was playing a shrewd hand of his own.

Davy wondered where Nydia, the tall maid, was that she had seen none of these movements.

Finding that he could see nothing by the door, the boy glided back and turned up in a room adjoining the parlor. Noiseless sliding doors separated the two apartments and he drew one back and looked in.

Dan Nicobar was sitting at the desk in the corner, his back to the young spy and his dark shadow on the wall.

He was looking through the desk, hunting here and there for something that seemed to escape his quest.

Davy Sharp stood like one turned into stone while he gazed at the man in the room.

Suddenly Dan Nicobar shut the desk and thrust something into his bosom. He seemed to have found at last the object which had almost exhausted his patience.

The ending of the search was so sudden that the boy, falling back from the eyes of the villain, made a noise which drew Nicobar upon his feet in an instant.

In a flash, as it were, he was springing across the room and before his eager hand the door swung back and Davy stood in his presence!

Never before had the boy ferret felt such a chill of absolute terror at his heartstrings. He could not flee from the hand of the man who had found him, therefore he stood his ground and gazed into Nicobar's face.

"Not a sound!" hissed Dan, bending forward and clutching the boy's arm. "Not a word, or I will choke your eyes out of your head! On the watch, were you? Come with me!"

"With you?"

"Yes—with me!"

There was no resisting the clutch of the nabob's right-hand man. Davy felt the fingers sink into his flesh and he was dragged into the parlor and the sliding door was shut behind them.

For a moment Nicobar held his little prisoner near the light and looked down into his face with the evil gleam of a fiend incarnate.

"This way. I guess they haven't any further use for you in this house," he suddenly went on. "We will find a better place—one where young spies can rest a long time."

Davy was pulled toward the hall, the door was opened and he was led out. Whither was he to be taken by the last man into whose hands he would have fallen if he could have had his choice?

Nicobar drew his young captive down the hall and out the back door at the end of it.

Davy now found himself in the yard with the stars overhead. He had been taken from the house too terrified to send up a note of warning, though he knew that it might have been heard by Nydia who would have sprung to the rescue, no matter how great was Dan Nicobar's power.

Beyond the house at the curb stood a cab with a man apparently dozing on his perch.

"Gods! am I to take a ride with this man?" mentally ejaculated the boy.

He was to do nothing else.

Dan Nicobar tossed his young charge into the dark depths of the vehicle and bounded in after him.

"Home," he said to the man on the seat, and in another moment the cab was rattling over the stones of Gotham.

All this seemed a dream of midnight horror to the boy, held firmly by the hand which had not left him for more than a minute since the capture. It seemed that he was the victim of some nightmare, and that, after awhile, he would waken and find himself in bed under Major Phenix's roof.

On, on went the cab, Dan Nicobar saying nothing to the boy in the dark, and when the horses halted at last and Davy ventured to look

out to see where they were, he pulled him back with a curse.

"You'll see all you want to look at in a few moments," said Nicobar.

Davy was lifted from the cab and hustled across a lot of stones into a house. The lock of the door clicked when it was closed, and he found himself in a dark hall.

In a few moments they were in another room, and Dan Nicobar, lighting the gas, threw his captive into a chair.

"How do you like it now?" said the man, with a grin that only darkened his face.

There was no reply.

"Do you think you will go back to tell the major that he had a visitor? I guess not. You see, I thought you were a sort of spy the first time I saw you—when that tall girl with a nerve like a tiger jolted every bone in my body. I didn't like the cut of your jib, and now I'll trim it to suit myself."

"You had no right to take me from the house."

"No right, eh?" laughed Nicobar. "I'll show you that I have a right to do anything I please. Who hired you to watch all night in that house?"

"That is my secret," said the boy, with tartness.

"Yes, I see, you have been employed. By the major?"

No answer.

Dan Nicobar went hurriedly to the window, as if he had heard a sudden noise, and Davy watched him as he listened there.

"I'm going out," he said, coming back. "Don't try to get away, boy. I want to see you right where you are when I return, and I guess I had better fix things to keep you here."

He produced some cords from a drawer in the table and bound Davy in the chair. If the boy spy had resisted, the end would have been the same; he could not have prevented the result.

"You're fixed now," said Nicobar, drawing back. "They'll miss you in the morning, but they won't raise much of a fuss over your absence. Nydia, the maid, will wonder a little while what became of the new boy; but that will be all."

"Nydia will do more than that," thought Davy Sharp. "She will see a part of my clothes in the bedroom and will know that I did not quit the house on my own hook. I warrant Nydia and Lorene will put their heads together over my vanishment and will do some tall thinking. But they may not suspect this cool rascal into whose hands I have fallen."

Ten minutes later he was the sole occupant of the room, lashed to the chair and unable to speak for a handkerchief that closed his mouth.

The light had been turned very low and the walls were one shadow.

Davy watched the mice that came out of several holes in one corner and looked at him with suspicion ere they came forward to play.

How he envied them their freedom! How he wished he had a hole into which he could draw his little body, and, escaping from the house, go and tell the story of his adventure to Jason Clew, the Silk-handed Ferret.

Hours slipped slowly away to the prisoner of the chair.

If Nicobar was Major Phenix's right-hand man why had he invaded the house at that late hour and searched the private desk in one corner?

The more the boy thought of this the deeper grew the puzzle, and he grew more and more eager to impart his information to the detective.

He could not tell how many hours passed while he sat bound in the torture chair. He knew that the night was wearing away and longed for the first glimpse of day that would steal into the room.

He fell asleep at last despite his resolve not to let sleep overcome him; but there was an end to his resistance and the mice ran over his feet without being seen.

All at once Davy Sharp awakened with a start. It seemed to him that some one had shaken him out of a sound slumber. Had Nydia stolen into the room and broken his sleep?

One glance was enough. He was still in the room and the chair.

There was the merest streak of light across the floor; he could see the walls now and noticed that they were bare; as if the owner of the property had refused to spend a dollar on their adornment.

But there was one thing that caught the boy spy's gaze.

There was a round hole in the wall which he was sure was not there when he was brought to the house by Dan Nicobar.

It was about three feet from the floor and he began to move his chair across the room toward the opening.

Inch by inch he accomplished his purpose and at last placed his eye at the opening.

What did he see?

With a cry of horror he fell back as far as the cords would let him and shuddered.

He had looked into a room beyond and saw reclining in a chair the body of a man with a silver dagger in the breast!

CHAPTER XXI.

BEATEN.

THAT the man was stone dead was evident at first glance.

The light which streamed into the room was enough to tell the horrified boy this. It showed him the shining hilt of the dagger—the deadly weapon of the League which Jason Clew was tracking, and the longer he gazed the more horrible grew the tableau of the chamber.

But he could not stir to raise the alarm. His own bonds had not relaxed a jot. The handkerchief which barely kept from suffocating him had not fallen down and he was deprived of the privilege of making known the murder.

But there was one thing about it all that lent an air of the deepest mystery to it.

The face of the man was covered with a white handkerchief.

He could not tell who the dead man was. The handkerchief was as impenetrable as a mask and effectually defied his searching gaze.

Davy Sharp sat at the hole in the wall some time. He could not draw back from the awful sight in the other chamber. It seemed to him that the wielder of the dagger would come back and give him a sight of his face.

At last the boy moved back his chair. He wondered when Dan Nicobar would come and the next moment another thought took possession of him.

Maybe the man in the other room was Nicobar himself.

"I wonder if Jason will get onto this crime if I am kept here?" he thought. "I would like to have a moment's liberty. I would be out of this trap and on my way to the ferret's office with something startling enough even for him."

Jason Clew knew nothing of the new crime. He was in another part of the city looking for the person he had resolved to find, as if upon her depended the solution of the mystery of the Silver Dagger.

What has become of Inez? was the question he had asked himself a thousand times.

While Jason Clew was looking for the trail he had so suddenly and strangely lost, a man who walked fast, was crossing one of the little squares where benches are placed under the trees for recreation and rest.

This man kept on until he entered a house, the door of which he locked carefully behind him.

Jack Dunbar passed on into a small room where he took a chair and threw his hat into one corner.

"I am going to play my big hand against him now," he said aloud. "He trumped my ace when he pulled the revolver on me in his own house because I told him that I wanted the girl, and all I could do was to get away at the muzzle of the weapon."

Jack grinned half madly to himself when he thought of this scene. It was not a pleasant picture for him and when he contemplated it he gnashed his teeth and swore.

"Let me see. I guess I know enough to begin," he went on. "I know something about the madness of Evaline, though I have completely lost Noah Moneybox whose memory could supply the missing links. The old man seems to have slipped out of the game, but I will get along without him."

Dunbar took something from his pocket, and opening it, displayed a bit of cotton in which lay a ring of peculiar pattern.

"He'd like to buy this," continued Jack, with another of his grins. "If I had pulled this on him when he pulled the pistol on me it would have been a stand-off. No; I would have had the advantage. I don't believe he would have met me as he did with this ring in my hands."

It was a gold ring with a serpent's head on top and in the eyes two rubies.

Jack looked at the ring a few moments and then wrapped it up again.

When he stood erect there was a smile at the corners of his mouth, and he laughed:

"The hand I am going to play will beat the one he drew on me at his house. I know what I am doing, and the Silver Dagger will soon have an exciting time within its circle."

He went out.

In a short time he turned up on a street not very far from the house he had left and rung the bell of a rather well-to-do building, to which he was admitted without ceremony.

Jack Dunbar walked forward and stopped in a room alongside the hall as if he had been there before.

For some seconds he was alone.

Presently there came into the room, with eyes that seemed to look him through, from the very first moment of contact, a woman whose figure was tall, and lithe of limb.

Jack bowed the moment he saw her.

"I told you that you should never darken my door again, unless—"

"I know," broke in the Silver Dagger. "I know just what you said, and how you said it. Five years have passed since I set foot in this house, and if I hadn't some news and a hand to play, I wouldn't be here now."

There was no reply, only the woman looked at Jack most curiously, and seemed to wait for him to speak.

"I want a little help," continued the man. "I am here to give something for a little assistance from you."

"What is it?"

"I want to know when Major Phenix was married."

"You do?" smiled the woman, her face coloring that instant. "You want to know when the nabob of M— street took a wife in the person of Evaline. What is your game now?"

"Never mind that."

"Look here. I must decline to tell you anything until I know something about your motive. You are playing one of your hands for which you are famous, or used to be. Why don't you go to the woman who can call up the dead?"

"You know she has ceased to call up such spirits."

"Sure enough. 'Killed by a dagger with a silver hilt,' the papers said."

Jack nodded.

"So you have come to me? What was your query? When did Major Phenix marry the woman who lost her mind and rushed to the river, there to drown her sorrows?"

"That is what I want to know."

"What good will the mere date of the marriage do you?"

"More than you think, perhaps."

"It will give you a card, eh? I think I know you pretty well," and the speaker smiled again. "You are always playing a hand, and what I don't like about you, is that trait which makes you turn on a friend as quickly as on a foe."

Jack Dunbar seemed to frown.

"You want the date, do you? You shall have it."

The woman, who might have been a little past forty, crossed the room, and dropped into a chair at the table.

"Will my giving you this information interfere in any way with the girl who is under his protection?" she asked, looking up into the face bending over her.

"I don't think it will."

"Have you designs on the girl?"

Jack Dunbar could not help wincing. The question hit him as squarely as an arrow strikes the center of the target.

"I guess I won't give you what you want," she said, dropping the pen she had taken up. "I will do nothing to mar the happiness of the creature called Lorene."

In an instant a flash of fire leaped up in the man's eyes.

"You are tricky," he growled. "You change your mind often and I am led to believe that you are against me."

"Think just what you wish. I won't give you the information because you want to use it against Major Phenix to the final detriment of the girl's happiness. I know she doesn't see very much, as it is, and I won't do anything to darken it."

Dunbar drew off and seemed to glare at the woman who was talking with a determination which he knew he could not break.

"You know where the door is," she said.

"Don't come back here till you have no such help to ask for."

He did not move.

"I will not do anything to hurt Lorene."

"You won't eh?"

"You have just heard me."

The tall figure of the member of the Silver Dagger seemed to increase in stature as he turned toward the door and laid one hand on the knob.

"I haven't been inside of this house for five years," he said, looking back at her. "I once thought I would never come back, but here I am, and before I go I want to say that you will wish you had given me the information I am after!"

"Is that a threat?" flashed the woman.

"Make the most of it!" cried Jack Dunbar.

"I will take it as I please," and she came toward him, her eyes fastened upon his figure and her hands clinched. "I have tried to keep out of this game of love and crime because I did not want to be dragged into public notice. When I read an account of the finding of the body of Madame Medusa with the Silver Dagger in her heart, I felt that I ought to come forward and tell all I knew, that I ought to go to one of these men-hunters and give them a clew which would be a sure one to the dark mystery. But here I am, not having opened my mouth. Why? I don't want to be dragged into court. I would sooner endure the tortures of hades than be pulled into the presence of men and made to tell what I know. I have held back for this reason. But do you want me to break my oath of secrecy and throw light upon this red puzzle which still baffles the best detectives of New York? Are you willing that I should do this?"

"Do what ever you please."

"You don't mean that," she answered. "You don't mean one word of what you have just said. You are the very last man to dare me to tell what I have kept hid all these years. Let us understand one another. You want information to enable you to play a hand, the intent of which is the wrecking of a young girl's life. I won't do it."

Jack Dunbar turned the knob and opened the door.

"You will have to look out, maybe," he said, with devilish intonation.

"I am armed," was the reply; "armed, as you never dream of being armed. So I will have to look out, will I? Madame Medusa was killed by a silver-hilted dagger. You miserable wretch, with the blood of your fellow-man even now on your hands, when you threaten me you only make sure the tightening of the noose over your own head."

What a beautiful picture of passion she looked as she stood in the middle of the room, covering Jack Dunbar with a quivering finger and transfixing him with her gleaming eyes.

"I have kept out of this mystery of crime from this moment. I have told you why: I don't want to be dragged back into public notice. A part of the world has forgotten me. What has become of the yellow vixen who came between me and that man years ago? Why don't you hunt her up and question her? But you know she would withhold the truth—that she would suspicion you and maybe refuse to tell you anything. Keep your distance, and hold back the card which will damage the happiness of Lorene!"

Jack Dunbar laughed.

"I mean it. You seem to have forgotten what I have been. You don't know, or, at least, you don't think that I can lift my hand and send you to the noose. And by the heavens above us! if you throw the card you have taken from the deck, I will send you to the knot of the sheriff!"

She meant every word she said, and Jack, trying to laugh fearlessly, left her alone with the echo of her threat.

CHAPTER XXII.

FOUND AT LAST.

"I DIDN'T make much of that time," confessed the man, as he emerged from that house with a doleful grin on his face. "She is as cool as when I had my last interview with her. Going to send me to the noose, eh? That's pleasant. It's a comforting thought just when I'm getting things fixed to suit myself. But I guess not, my lady. I guess I won't feel that noose tighten for some time."

The beaten rascal went back to the den he had left a short time before.

This time he was seen by a man who kept him in sight, and who, when he came forth, followed him to the house where he had left Inez the mute.

Jason Clew, the ferret, now believed that he was on the girl's trail, and having seen Jack come out of the house, entered it himself and stood in one of the rooms.

He had barely closed the door behind him when one ahead opened, and in the light falling from the adjoining apartment, he saw the object of his hunt, the beautiful mute.

Found at last!

Hugging the dark corner where he stood, Jason Clew watched Inez with feelings of intense triumph.

He longed to rush forward and clutch her wrist, but something held him back.

There was a look about the girl which restrained his eager hand and he looked at her while she stood in the doorway with the light on her face causing him to wonder if she were not the guilty one—if her hand had not plunged the dagger into Madame Medusa's bosom.

The door was shut almost as suddenly as it had opened.

The figure of the dumb girl passed out of sight and the ferret of Gotham was left in the dark.

Not a sound was now heard about the house. If Inez had passed beyond the other room he had not heard her, and his curiosity aroused and determined that the girl should not escape him again, he moved forward and tried the door.

It opened and he stepped into the room.

As he did this he heard a noise and a draught of air touched his face.

"The girl is escaping!" he cried. "She has quitted the house. If I lose her now the trail may never be recovered."

He passed on, opening and closing several more doors and soon emerged from the house upon the street.

He was in time to catch sight of a female figure ere it vanished round the nearest corner and in a moment he was in full chase. There was no doubt that he had found Inez again on the streets of New York, flitting along like a shadow and when she led him into another street he felt that she was going back to Madame Medusa's home.

Back to that house of the death mystery!

Inez went straight to the house of the witch of Gotham and entered as she had done before from the rear.

Jason Clew, with the cunning of one who had tracked before, followed and stood at last in the room which had such a terrible charm for him.

He saw before him the form of Inez and noticed that her face was paler than usual and that of late her figure had lost some of its grace.

The light which the girl had turned on in the room of the murder showed her to the detective, and he did not lose sight of a single movement of hand or body.

The chair into which she had plunged the dagger with such murderous vehemence stood before her and Jason Clew saw that she eyed it with strange curiosity.

Suddenly there flashed in her hand a blade at sight of which the man-ferret started.

Inez approached the chair with the springing stealthiness of the pantheress, and in a moment she had buried the dagger into the back of the seat as though she had aimed at a human heart.

It was the same terrible pantomime he had witnessed before in that same room, but it seemed to him that the hand which now drove the dagger into the velvet had lost some of its descending swiftness—that Inez was losing strength.

She fell back a minute later, clutching the hilt of the dagger and with eyes riveted on the mark it had left in the chair.

All at once she turned toward the gas jet, but the detective was too quick for her this time.

With a spring which intercepted her hand in its intentions he landed at her side and the next second Inez was in Jason Clew's grip!

"You've played it on me several times, but now you are in a trap," he said while she, white-faced, watched the movements of his lips.

Her wrist felt as cold as ice and seemed to send a thrill through his nerves.

Not a muscle moved while she looked at him, now a twinkle in the depths of her eyes, and now a stony stare.

"Come out of this place. It has too many associations of horror," continued the ferret, leading Inez from the room into the larger one adjoining.

Of course he still retained his hold on her wrist as if he feared that to relinquish it for a second would be to lose her through one of the secret panels of the place.

She went with him as unresisting as a child, and when he had closed the door and led her to a chair, she let a smile wreath her lips.

"Why did you kill her, Inez?" asked Jason Clew.

Inez looked up into his face and seemed to study it intently.

"Did Madame Medusa tell your fortune and make it darker than you want it to be?"

Not a move on the girl's part.

"This isn't the first time I've seen you go through with that act over the chair," he continued. "I was here once before when you were in the house and saw you drive the blade into the velvet back of the seat."

She seemed to fall back as if she wanted to drop out of sight, but all at once she sprang up and stood before him.

"Do you want paper?" said the detective, taking his memorandum from his pocket and throwing it on the table at her side.

The black eyes glowed.

"I guess I can trust you now," said Jason, releasing the wrist he had been holding.

Inez went to the table and bent over the book there.

Opening it, she took up the pencil and began to write.

"You are the man I have been warned against," she wrote. "I told Jack that I would kill you, but you have caught me."

When he had read he looked up and caught her eyes watching him.

"So Jack has had you in his keeping?"

Inez nodded.

"But never mind that! You haven't told me why you killed Madame Medusa."

The old look of madness and mystery came back to her brilliant eyes.

"Don't you intend to solve the mystery?"

"Why should I?" she wrote. "You say I killed Madame Medusa. You did not see me do it."

"No, I did not, but I have found the clew and you cannot escape me."

When she had interpreted these words and caught the glow of victory in the ferret's eye, she seemed to smile.

"You wrote on the wall of the old house where you lived, watched by Daniz, the exact time of the killing."

"Did you see it there?" said her rapid pencil. "I saw it and came a little too late to find you."

The detective's mishap seemed to delight the dumb girl.

For a little time she stood before Jason Clew, more of a mystery than ever before.

He was now sure that in her bosom was locked the secret of Madame Medusa's death; that she knew by whose hand the Silver Dagger had fallen; but would she ever tell?

"Your guilty act brought you back here and urged you to go through with it again and again," he said. "You must have hated her beyond measure."

She went back to the paper, but suddenly pushed the book aside without tracing a single sentence on the page.

"What have you done?" cried the detective.

"You don't intend to tell me why you took life in this house? Then, I will have to take you away."

She recoiled, a look of fright in her eyes, and was on the eve of breaking away from him when she dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

Jason Clew looked down at the mute girl and studied her a long time.

She did not stir.

"There is some secret here which she intends to keep, come what may," he said to himself. "Inez holds in her power the solution of the mystery. She may even go beyond that and be the keeper of another secret almost as dark."

He did not disturb the girl, but waited until she looked up, showing a face, colorless, but beautiful and seamed with trouble.

All at once she held out her hand and the detective took it.

Starting to her feet, she led him back into the chamber of crime and then dropped his hand.

Then began a pantomime which he had not seen before.

Inez retreated to the furthest corner of the room, and touching an unseen button in the wall caused the opening of a panel there. In another minute she pretended to have glided into the apartment from the secret compartment and once more was slipping toward the chair.

But her approach was now that of a man. Inez seemed to have lost her sex in the movements she made.

Watched by the startled detective, she neared the chair and suddenly pretended to seize an imaginary occupant, drawing the head back with the suddenness of a garroter.

Jason Clew had deprived her of the dagger some time before, but she pretended to draw a weapon and to hold it above the chair.

All at once her hand fell with the swiftness of a thunderbolt and a thud followed the stroke.

Inez turned back from the imaginary crime and began to open the drawers of the various pieces of furniture in the room. She went from spot to spot, not once glancing back to see if she was observed, though she might have known that every movement was seen by the interested ferret.

She rested at last. Turning suddenly she came toward the detective, and by a certain gesture told him that the pantomime had ended.

She became Inez again, but up to that time she had played the man to perfection.

"This is wonderful," said Jason Clew. "If Inez did not kill Madame Medusa she witnessed the deed. She holds in her heart the secret of the crime. She saw it committed, and some mad freak brought her back here to go through with it just as it was done that night."

He caught her hand and drew her toward him.

"I understand you," he said. "You saw it done. You were in the house that night. Now, who did it?"

The only reply he got was a perplexing smile and a shake of the head.

"She shall not baffle me," cried the ferret. "I will have the secret she holds!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

DANIZ AND HER MASTER.

THE hole in the wall before him had a terrible fascination for Davy Sharp, the young prisoner of Dan Nicobar's den.

He knew that beyond it was the dead man in the chair, with the face covered by the handkerchief and the dagger in the bosom.

More than once the young spy shuddered when he looked into that room now revealed by the light that had come and saw the awful tableau it held.

The crime must have been committed while he slept. There could have been no noise, for he had not heard anything. The silver dagger had done its work as noiselessly as possible, and the new mystery was as deep as the one that puzzled the Silk-handed Ferret.

Davy wondered why Nicobar did not come back. What had become of the man who had brought him to that house from Major Phenix's? Would he never come to release him?

While the boy occupied the chair in the room adjoining the scene of crime, Major Phenix, coming down into the luxurious parlor of his house, looked about the room and seemed to see that some one had been there.

Stepping quickly to the desk, he opened it and looked among the papers there. Suddenly he turned pale.

"Some one was here last night," he said. "I have been robbed!" and he touched the bell on the table.

Nydia responded.

"Is the boy up?" asked the major.

"I haven't heard him."

"Go and see."

The tall maid went up-stairs with a smile on her face. She found some of Davy Sharp's clothes hanging on the chair, but the boy himself was gone.

"The young scamp was a spy!" grated Major Phenix, with an oath. "He came to the house for a purpose," and dismissing Nydia, he went to the table and swore again.

But suddenly he started and, bounding from the chair, stooped over the carpet at the desk.

Something glittered on the floor, and the next moment he held in his hand a sleeve-button, at which he was gazing with a half grin.

"This seems to be a clew, but why should he rob me?" he asked.

At this juncture there was a rustle of garments in the hall, and Lorene stood before him.

"Nydia tells me that you have been robbed," she said, facing him.

"She was not told to tell you this."

"Perhaps not, but the news was brought to me. Do you think your friend did it?"

"My friend?"

"Nicobar. He was in the house last night after twelve."

Major Phenix started.

"After twelve? Who saw him?"

"I did. He was standing in the hall when I caught sight of him. I did not watch him very long for the sight of the wretch is abhorrent to me, so I went back, leaving him there."

"Are you sure it was after midnight that you saw him in the house?"

"I am sure of it."

Major Phenix made no reply, but clutched the silver button and his teeth met madly.

"The girl proves it," he said to himself when Lorene had withdrawn. "I have been robbed of just what Dan Nicobar would take."

That was all.

Twenty minutes later the nabob of M— street sallied from the house and almost crossed the city.

He entered the house where we saw him last depositing in the wall along a certain stair-case a piece of paper which, as we know, fell into Jason Clew's eager hands.

He climbed the flight and rapped at a door on the fourth floor.

"You won't find her in, sir," said a voice, at sound of which he turned. "She went off day before yesterday, and—"

What, old Daniz gone? No wonder the nabob started, and when he went down again he wondered to himself what had become of her.

Major Phenix was several squares from the house when his arm was peculiarly touched, and he looked into the very face he wanted to see.

"You've left the nest, they tell me," he said, looking into Daniz's face.

"I thought he was about to make it too hot for me."

"Jason Clew?"

The old woman nodded.

"Take me to your new nest. I have something to say."

Without more ado Daniz obeyed, and when Major Phenix had entered the dingy room and taken a chair, he told about the robbery and gave Lorene's account of the nocturnal visit.

"Of course you still have the girl under your eye," said he.

"I have not. Inez has escaped."

The six words seemed to lift Major Phenix from his chair.

"My God! I gave you that special commission."

"I know, and I did my best."

For a moment he sat still with a white face, but all at once he seized her hand and said:

"But you will find her, won't you?"

"I can try."

"There must be no failure. Inez must be found, I say. You know how valuable she is. The detective thinks she killed the witch of Gotham."

"Who told you so?"

"Jack."

"The cunning liar!" cried Daniz. "He tells a good many lies, Jack does. And he told you that Jason Clew thinks the dumb girl wielded the dagger that night?"

"He did."

A smile passed over the yellowish face of Daniz, the Dago, and she looked away for an instant.

"Where is Nicobar?"

"Down in the new house, perhaps."

"Will I find him there?" eagerly questioned Major Phenix.

"I think so."

He arose to go.

"I saw her yesterday," said Daniz, looking him in the eye.

"Saw her? On the street?"

"No, at the window."

"How does she look?"

"I did not get a good look at her; but from what I could see she reminded me of the woman who, long ago, gave you so much trouble."

"Is she still in the same house?"

"She is still there."

"Daniz, why don't you go and see her?" he asked, bending toward the woman and lowering his voice.

"What would it be worth?"

"More than you think. I am well fixed again."

Daniz did not speak, but glided cat-like across the floor until she had reached him.

"No, it is not for me," she said. "I never could enter her presence. Her eyes would burn me out after what has been done. I could not stand before her a minute. No, no, this job is not for me."

"There was a time when you liked to carry out the commands of the Silver Dagger," he said.

"I know, but I am old and nearly ready to die."

"And age makes you afraid!"

"Have it so, if you will. But think. Twice this same ferret has escaped from my trap. Once I had him and a companion walled up, yet both got away. It is hard to fight against a man like that."

"Well, Daniz, are you going to sit still and hold out your hands for the bracelets the moment he comes upon you?"

"Not that!" cried the woman, with flashing eyes. "I shall fight him to the last, but I will not go to the face I saw at the window."

Major Phenix laughed, but that did not quiet the old hag.

"Step by step he is following the trail," she went on. "He is picking up link after link. What if he should find Inez?"

"He must not!"

"That is all very nice to say, but you know something about him. You know that he will not stop until he is at the end of the trail, and when he is there the history of the Dagger will be at his tongue's end—"

"Stop!" commanded Major Phenix. "You talk like a coward. What was the oath taken for? Why did you swear to hold the Silver Dagger between our own hearts and our foes? Have you forgotten that years ago, when you had beauty and courage, you took the oath on the crossed blades, and that we swore to stand by one another?"

"I forget nothing."

"Then don't play coward when we have but one thing to do—find this detective and silence him."

"Is that easy?" grinned old Daniz.

Major Phenix was silent.

"Everything can be accomplished by the Dagger," he said at last. "Inez is not far away. She will hide among those of her people who occupy the quarter where Italy's children congregate."

"Don't think it. There is a man whom Inez obeys implicitly."

"Who is that?"

"Jack."

A scowl darkened Major Phenix's face. He recalled his last interview with Jack Dunbar.

"A man took her from the house."

"Was it Jack?"

"I more than half believe it was."

"Then find where he is—track him down and discover the girl. I will hold you responsible for Inez's return."

The nabob of M— street had turned away, when, with the alertness of a young girl, old Daniz sprung forward and caught his sleeve.

"I can't stand this any longer. I don't sleep of nights, but lie awake and see a noose dangling before my eyes all the time. I have done with the Silver Dagger. Nicobar says he will trap the detective, but he will fail. I have tried it—had him twice in the net, but he got out. We can't play against this man."

"He has frightened you. Why, his very shadow has given you cold creeps," laughed Major Phenix. "I won't absolve you from your oath. You belong to the Dagger as long as there's a drop of blood in your veins. You are one of us and must obey the commands of the code."

She fell back, her teeth chattering and her eyes fixed upon his cool, impassive face.

"You must find Inez, you must recover the girl at once! I won't send you to the house where you saw the face at the window. Remember, the dumb girl must come back under your eye."

Daniz stood in the middle of the room like a statue. She had drawn from beneath the folds of her dress a dagger about the hilt of which she had wound her skeleton fingers.

"You ask too much. You throw me into the path of this human ferret who cannot be baffled, whom no traps can hold," she cried. "I can't go out and look for Inez. I must hide or he will find me."

"Then, take the consequences!"

Old Daniz sprung at him with the hoarse cry of a maddened tigress; but he had read her eye and the hand that came down was caught in mid-air. The following moment Major Phenix was holding her at arm's length and laughing in her face.

"You must find Inez," he cried. "I'll give you till to-morrow night. If you fail you will receive the dagger of the League," and pushing her from him, he strode from the room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

INEZ OR LORENE?

"So I am to find Inez or feel the point of the Silver Dagger, am I? I must unearth this dumb girl who knows so much or live in the shadow of the blade that has killed so many! What shall I do?—bid defiance to him or go out and, by hunting Inez, cross the path of the secret hunter of New York?"

Thus spoke old Daniz while the footsteps of Major Phenix still rung in her ears.

She had picked up the dagger which his grip had shaken from her hand and stood glaring at the door with the orbs of the tigress.

"I will go out, but not after Inez," she went on. "I told him that I would not enter the house of the woman whose face I have seen at the window, but I will. I will stand once more

face to face with her. He may hunt me down for it; he may turn on me for what I am about to do, but I will serve the Dagger no longer; I will not please him by a service which, if kept up, can end but one way—in death!”

Daniz the Dago, slipped from the house and hurried off in a direction opposite the one taken by Major Phenix.

Half an hour later she halted in front of the house visited by Jack Dunbar. She was greeted by the same woman who had refused to give Jack any information concerning Major Phenix's marriage.

When the tall figure of the Italian entered the parlor which was dark with shadows she was stared at by the other one and all at once a singular cry was heard.

“I know you now,” said the woman who had met Jack Dunbar so firmly. “In Heaven's name, what brings you to my house?”

“I thought you would be surprised. I am here to be killed if you want to do that deed. I am come to tell you something you may not know—something for which you may have been waiting to hear for years. You know now that I am Daniz.”

For a moment there was no response. The mistress of the house faced Daniz, looking her in the eye with a stern countenance.

“I know what I ought to do, but I will not,” she said. “Yes, you are Daniz; you are the woman who served him years ago, and whose hands stole from the cradle the child I placed there one night.”

“I deny nothing,” said Daniz. “I did that deed.”

“What have you to say? Did he send you to me?”

“No.”

“Go on, then.”

“You know what has happened; you must have read about the mystery of N— street—how an old fortune-teller was found murdered in her house—”

“I know! That was told by the papers days ago.”

“Well, one of the persons suspected of that crime is a girl.”

“The papers have said nothing about this.”

“No, but these human bloodhounds keep their secrets to themselves. Some of them don't tell all they know to the reporters. A young girl is being tracked by one of the coolest ferrets of the city.”

“What is all this to me?” was the quick response. “You come to me; you of all persons. You stole my babe from the cradle, and with the admission on your tongue, you are here, and I have not plunged the dagger into your heart.”

“I brought one along, and it is at your service,” and Daniz held out a dagger, from which the other shrank with a cry.

“No, I won't do it. I will leave you to the vengeance of Heaven. I said once that some day I would stand over the corpse of the person whose soul was blackened by that infamous deed; but I won't touch you. You have come to tell me about this young girl who is suspected of what is called the Crime of the Silver Dagger?”

“I have,” answered Daniz.

“I am listening.”

The Italian, who had taken a seat in front of the woman, seemed to study the face before her, as if it called up scenes of other days.

“In the first place, something about Madame Medusa. She was a woman with a history. She loved a man who, in turn, blackened her soul, and she fled from him to become a witch. Madame Medusa was not always the witch of this city. When she had that wonderful beauty—wonderful and accursed, which was hers in years gone by—she became one of the League of the Silver Dagger. She was a keeper of secrets; she knew all about the past of every member of the Circle. She refused one day to play a hand of magic for a man whose power in the mystic League was terrible. She broke one of the codes of the Order when she refused.”

“And was condemned by your Order?”

“Wait!” smiled Daniz. “She went so far as to tell a girl all about the League. She had for her friend and frequent visitor one whose tongue could not speak though she could read the lips. Inez came often to Madame Medusa's house of magic. She knew how she duped her victims and how she got at the secrets they carried in their bosoms. Inez could keep a secret, for she was dumb.”

“Who was Inez?” eagerly asked the Dago's listener.

“Why can't you hear me through? When the detective who is on the trail went to the house of death and found Madame Medusa dead in her chair, he found also Inez. The girl had stolen into the house, but first of all he had found the girl's ring on the floor. She had come back for it, and they met there for the first time—the ferret and the mute. Inez made her escape, thanks to the secret doors and panels of the witch's abode. That encounter made the ferret anxious to find the silent girl, for he believed that she knew much concerning the last moments of Madame Medusa—that she might have been a witness to the mysterious crime,

and ever since he has been hunting her high and low among the shadows of New York.

“More than once he almost had her in his grip, but I baffled him.”

“You?” cried the listener. “Why should you baffle the detective?”

Daniz opened her sleeve and showed her companion the brown arm above the skeleton wrist.

“Look! Behold the mark of the League,” she went on, and the strange person bent forward to inspect the spot which her finger touched. “I carry on my arm the sign of the Silver Dagger. Because I wear that mark I baffled the detective; because I carry on my skin the crossed blades, I entrapped the ferret of Gotham and would have kept him walled up till death came if he had not outwitted me. Inez escaped him so long as I could keep sight of her, but now she has escaped my vigilance, and I am to find her within ten hours or feel the point of the Silver Dagger.”

“You are betraying the Order you have served all these years.”

“I am. I have defied the head of the League. I have bared my bosom for the stroke of the dagger by coming here.”

“But the girl? Is she guilty? Does the detective suspect the right one, and was it her dagger that killed Madame Medusa?”

“What have I told you?” smiled Daniz. “She encountered the detective in the same room where the corpse sat in the witch's chair, and whenever she could get away from me she would go back to the house of magic and plunge the dagger again and again into the same spot.”

“Is the dumb girl mad?”

“That would look it, wouldn't it? What if the detective had seen her in Madame Medusa's, striking the chair with the needle-pointed blade?”

“It would be against her.”

Old Daniz made no reply.

“I now come to the babe you lost,” she said at last.

“With the truth, woman?”

Daniz raised her skinny hand.

“With the solemn truth before Heaven,” she said most solemnly. “I will tell you something and then face the point of the dagger. The child grew to womanhood. She became one of the loveliest of women and, but for her surroundings would be courted by hundreds for her worth.”

“My child!” cried the listener. “The babe for whom I have yearned ten thousand times!”

A curious expression was seen to cross the old hag's face.

“Where is she? Are you going to stop there and let the rest remain a secret?”

Daniz crossed the room but turned suddenly and came back.

“I have sworn never to speak aloud the secret which covers the identity of your child stolen by these hands by order of the Silver Dagger.”

The other seemed to recoil with a sharp exclamation.

“But why come to me if you will not tell?”

“Haven't I told you that I have dared the point of the blade—that, if I do not find Inez within ten hours I am to feel the steel?”

“But you can tell me and escape that. It would not find you here.”

“What, me hide in this house?” cried Daniz.

“Why, some night you would get up and plunge the blade into my heart.”

“I could do that for no living creature!”

“Not even the man who wrought all the woe?” curiously asked Daniz.

“Don't tempt me too far,” was the quick response. “I know that he lives; I know that under another name—perhaps under more than one—he lives the life of a blood-stained man. I saw him once; it was a year ago, and if he had not escaped me, there would have been a daggered man on the sidewalk.”

“I told you so,” laughed old Daniz. “I knew you would hunt him down even now.”

“Enough!” was the answer. “Come back to the child you stole to gratify the Silver Dagger. You shall tell me where she is.”

The Dago looked into the flashing eyes before her and threw the dagger she had drawn into the woman's lap.

“The oath of secrecy was too horrible to be broken.”

“Then, I will play my hand. You have filled my soul with a storm of bitter vengeance. Daniz, guilty woman, as I live, I shall hunt you down from pillar to post from this moment. Kill you? No, I will not. But I will see that you are dragged before the bar of Eternal Justice—that all your past is opened, though it covers me with shame. I will do this for the privilege of folding once more my child to my heart.”

“But the Silver Dagger may come between you and success.”

“I know. You mean that it may take the life of that child.”

There was silence on the Italian's part.

“Where did he run across the beautiful girl who lives under his roof?” suddenly asked the woman.

“Lorene?” asked Daniz.

“Yes. She is not his child. Tell me where the man who calls himself Major Phenix found the girl in this house?”

Old Daniz shook her head.

“Is that another secret which you are forbidden to divulge in the face of deadly penalties?”

“I stop here.”

In an instant the woman who had heard the Italian through sprung up and the next moment her fingers closed around the sallow wrist.

“You madden a tortured mother!” she cried. “You shall reveal the identity of my child. You have told me about Inez, the suspected, and of Lorene, the rascal nabob's daughter, so-called. You have crossed my threshold to torture this heart of mine, pretending that you have abandoned the Silver Dagger. You are still in its circle. You are employed by the master hand to come to me with this story. He sent you to this house whose steps you should have been ashamed to cross. You are still the child-stealer of old—the guilty woman whose hand committed a crime that shocked a State. You know who killed Madame Medusa and why she was poniarded. In your breast are locked a dozen dark secrets, any one of which would tighten the rope about a human neck. You pretend to fear the detectives when you fear them not. Woman, witch of a score of crimes, you shall reveal the identity of my child ere you quit this house or—”

Old Daniz with a sudden effort broke from the grip of the person before her.

“I have told you near enough,” she said, waving her off.

“Which one is it?—Inez or Lorene?”

The only answer was a derisive laugh from the throat of the old hag.

Daniz fell back from before the person who sprung toward her, and reached the door. But the knob would not turn.

“There is no getting out of here till I open the door,” she heard.

“You are shut in until that time. Don't you think you have taken one step too many? You did not expect to play such a bold hand when you came. A creature with your past don't become penitent all at once. He sent you to see how I lived and to torture me again. There was a man here with a single question which I refused to answer. He went off without what he wanted; but you shall tell me the truth.”

A quick step carried the speaker toward Daniz, and before the old hag could resist or slip away, she was seized and pushed against the wall.

“Mercy!” she cried, but the sound was soon stifled.

“You shall have it—the same sort of mercy you had on me years ago! You have roused the hot tiger blood I inherited from my mother. I will let it take its course unless you open your lips and tell me where my child is.”

The eyes of the woman in front of Daniz seemed to flash fire. The Dago knew that the fingers were almost meeting in her throat, and the words that struggled to her lips were kept back by the mad, impulsive hands.

“Which one is my child?—Inez or Lorene?”

“Which one do you think?” Daniz managed to say.

“I am not to guess, but you are to reveal.”

At this moment Daniz, exerting all her strength, tried to break from the vise-like grasp.

“I will hold you here till you are dead!” said the other. “I will not be punished for taking the life of a wretch like you. Quick! Out with the truth. Inez or Lorene?”

The sallow-black eyes of the Italian were starting from her head.

There were two hands at her throat and they were vying with each other as to which one would deprive her of life first.

“Inez or Lorene? Name my child!” cried the woman.

“It is Inez, but she killed Madame Medusa!” said the serpent of the League at last, and the other, releasing her, fell back, while Daniz sunk at the foot of the wall with a half-stifled cry like a death-moan.

“Named at last, but a murderess!” cried the white-faced creature as she threw her hot hands to her forehead and, stumbling over her victim, rushed from the chamber to come back no more.

CHAPTER XXV.

JASON CLEW IN A NEW ROLE.

WE left Jason Clew, the Silk-handed Ferret, in the house of magic with Inez, the mute, once more in his grip, and, as he thought, on the eve of solving the mystery of the Silver Dagger.

But the detective was still far from the end of the trail he had followed with such tenacity ever since striking it and the dumb girl was to prove as great a puzzle as before.

When she had told him by the paper upon which she had written some startling sentences that she would not disclose what she knew, the disappointment of the ferret knew no bounds.

“Am I to be baffled here and by this girl who holds the key to the secret?” he asked himself. “Am I to lose the trail because she refuses to tell me more?”

Inez seemed to read the very thoughts that bothered the man before her. She seemed to see that he was deeply puzzled and a smile for

a moment relieved the sadness of her countenance.

"If you will let Inez go, the mystery may be solved the sooner," she suddenly wrote.

"Let you go to be caught no more?" was the quick answer.

"You shall find Inez again."

"Do you promise me, girl?"

"I do."

"I will do it," said Jason to himself. "I will trust this dumb creature."

Then he looked at her and fell back.

"You are free. I have trusted you. Go!"

For half a second Inez seemed on the eve of remaining longer, but all at once, with another look at the chair into which, on several occasions, she had plunged the dagger, she turned and strode away. At the door she paused a moment and smiled at the detective.

"That's good-by, I suppose," said he, as the figure of the beautiful mute vanished, and then he stood alone in the chamber where he had found and lost one of the links of the dark crime of the Silver Dagger.

He did not try to track her home, though if he had followed her he might have seen her go back to the house to which she had been taken by Jack Dunbar.

Jason Clew wanted some news from the man who lived the life of a nabob on M— street, and as if the information he had received from Davy Sharp, his young partner, was not enough, he resolved to enter the place himself.

"I want to see this man at home," he said. "I want to know how he lives—this man who is so closely connected with the Dagger League."

Just an hour after the detective's adventure in the house of magic, Major Phenix in his parlor received a man at whom he stared for a moment, with the suspicions of a man with a mind always on the alert.

Jason Clew stood in the major's house for the first time, and in the presence of the man whom he had tracked on more than one occasion.

Major Phenix, who had just come in from the street, and from a look after Dan Nicobar, whom he had failed to find at his last place of residence, was not in the best of humor to receive a visitor; but he looked at Jason with a suave smile and ingenuously asked what had brought him to the house.

Ere the detective could reply, he thought he heard the rustle of garments on the stair, and wondered if Lorene, Felix Delroyd's love, was not looking down upon them from some spot on the steps.

The ferret informed Major Phenix that he was a real estate agent, who had some excellent lots near the city, and hearing that he (the major) was a man of means, he had ventured to bring the rare bargains to his notice by a personal visit.

Major Phenix smiled.

The last thing he wanted to invest in, he said, was property. He had some money, it was true, not very much, but enough to make a nice thing of a judicious investment, but really he did not know how long he might continue to reside in Gotham.

"You have been here a long time, major?" said the detective.

"Yes; but I'm liable to leave at any time."

"Tired of New York, eh?"

"I don't know; but one wants a change now and then, you know."

"Yes," smiled the ferret. "I could offer you a bargain in a piece of city property which I know will sell cheap just now, but which, when some folks get over their uncanniness, will go up like a balloon. The stain on the house will not influence you, I know, Major Phenix; but I can't get people to look at it just now."

"Indeed! Is the property haunted?"

"It is the Madame Medusa house," was the reply, "the house in which the old fortune-teller was killed some time ago. It was placed in my hands for sale the other day, but I find that some people are afraid of such places and I am compelled to offer it at less than one-half its actual value."

"You'll sell it, as you say, when the whim of the people is right," asked Major Phenix.

"I think so. By the way, the detectives are still at fault concerning that affair."

"So I hear. It baffles the best of them."

Major Phenix took some cigars from the table drawer and pushed them across the cloth.

"I happen to know one of the coolest ferrets in the city who has been working up the case by himself ever since it came before the public, but he seems to be as far from a clew now as when he started."

"The best of them fail," was the reply.

"Of course, and when a murder is so adroitly planned as that one seemed to have been, there is not much hope of success, I don't care how shrewd the ferrets are who get upon the trail. My friend, Jason Clew, you may have heard of him, is at a loss what to do next, and I have twitted him till he sometimes gets out of humor and swears he will throw up the job and go back to something easier."

Major Phenix's face, hidden at this moment behind some thick smoke, was not seen by the ferret of Gotham.

"It's a wonderful house, as I have discovered

since taking it to sell," Jason Clew went on. "It has some secret rooms where one would not look for anything of the kind, and the other day I touched a button which revealed a little apartment that contained a lot of papers carefully folded and poked away in little pigeon-holes. These, I am almost sure, must have escaped the eyes of the ferrets; but you see I had no right to disturb them."

Major Phenix did not betray any surprise when the detective spoke thus.

"Those papers might contain a clew," he said.

"I don't know. They might be a list of the old clairvoyant's dupes, for Madame Medusa had dozens in this city. I did not even look at one of the papers, but left them where they had been found. Indeed, the door swung back before I could quit the little chamber and I found myself imprisoned for a moment."

"Could you rediscover the button in the wall?"

"I think I could. I have a good memory and I recollect looking at the spot where it is concealed, as I thought that some day I might want to look into the chamber again."

"Jason Clew ought to know about the secret room," suggested the major.

"I am not particularly interested in the avenging of the woman who preyed upon her fellow-creatures," was the reply. "I don't care to have the old house brought into further notice by the finding of the documents. Already the crime of the Silver Dagger is almost forgotten in some quarters and by and by it will have passed from the minds of all and I shall get rid of the place."

"If you keep on you will interest me in the house of magic," said Major Phenix. "I confess that I have a weak side for such mysteries. I once sifted a murder puzzle to the bottom and surprised the ferrets who were engaged on the case. A hidden room filled with papers that might throw some light on the Madame Medusa affair? This is exciting and I have a mind to go and look at the old house. But you propose to reveal nothing more, not even the location of the room until you have sold the building?"

"I could not do less," said Jason Clew. "I am anxious to sell the house and, since you know that it contains a secret, and as you say sometimes interest yourself in such things, you would not expect me to open that little door for nothing and lose a bargain?"

"You are right. You look at this matter in a business light and I don't blame you."

Half an hour later Jason Clew, the pretended real estate agent, walked from the house on M— street and with a smile which its tenant did not see, hurried away.

During his visit he had seen nothing of Davy Sharp, the young spy he had placed under the major's roof. If the boy was on the alert, and he did not doubt that he was still playing his part to perfection, though Davy was doing nothing of the kind, as we happen to know, he must have taken mental notes of the interview, and then the detective thought of the noise he had heard on the stairs.

"I doubt not, that Lorene heard us, too—that she was leaning over the balustrade, catching every word to be caught," he said to himself.

He went back to the house of magic. Inez did not meet him there this time, and when he shut himself up in one of the rooms and so well concealed that the keenest eye could not have detected him in an hour's hunt, he wondered when his cool game would bring forth fruit.

Jason Clew, cooped up in darkness that rivaled the gloom of an Egyptian tomb, heard nothing for a long time. The house seemed as still as when the queen of the black art sat in her chair with the Silver Dagger in her bosom.

All at once, after he had waited till his patience had nearly oozed out at his finger ends, he heard a noise which he felt did not emanate from the mice that had run over his feet in the darkness.

The next moment the detective was looking out into the room before him and there in the light of a small dark lantern stood the figure of a man.

Though the light was not very bright, he could see the man from head to foot.

A mask hid a part of the face but could not conceal the gray beard which marked its wearer from the moment he fell under the ferret's gaze.

Major Phenix stood before the detective of the metropolis!

He had entered the room with very little noise and when he slid across the carpet his feet sent forth no sound.

"This must be the room," he said. "This is the room she used to work most in. Here she lived and plied her art, hoodwinking her thousand and one dupes. He did not say where the button was and I did not care to question him. But it must be somewhere in this room. I won't let it slip through my fingers. There's too much at stake."

The lantern was placed on a table so that its light would fall upon a certain wall and the detective saw the major begin to sound the partition.

There was an eagerness in Major Phenix's movements that riveted the attention of the hidden ferret of New York.

His searching fingers seemed to cover every square inch of the wall; he felt it from the floor to far above his head, and when he had sounded one side of the chamber he came over to the other. In a little while he was at work on the wall behind which stood the man of many clews.

"What if he should find the button that opens that door?" thought Jason. "But he won't. I have arranged that," and he fell to listening to the fingers of the man searching eagerly for something that did not exist.

"It doesn't seem to be here for all," said Major Phenix, drawing back and standing at the table with his face turned full upon the hiding-place of the ferret. "It has escaped me if it be in this apartment. I have sounded every inch for nothing. Now for another room."

He picked up his light and left the chamber. The next moment the secret panel in the wall slid to one side and the cat-like tread of the detective was at his heels.

Frequent visits to the house had rendered Jason Clew familiar with most of its secrets. He knew where the hidden doors were and into what dark places they led.

Watched by the keen-eyed detective, Major Phenix searched the next room with the same thoroughness that he had bestowed on the first one.

But the hidden documents kept away from his fingers.

"I can't find them with the toil of an hour," he suddenly exclaimed. "I wonder if the girl knows where they are? Daniz must find Inez, and then I will wring from her the secret, if she knows it. She knows too many as it is. I am through for to-night."

Major Phenix came back to the room of the crime and Jason Clew read disappointment but not disheartenment on his face, for he had removed the mask for a moment and stood revealed as the nabob of M— street.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JACK AND INEZ.

DAVY SHARP, tied to the chair in the strange house, was fast losing his patience. He could not keep from thinking of the still tenant in the adjoining room—the man in the chair with a dagger in his bosom.

Many hours had passed since Dan Nicobar brought him from Major Phenix's house to the place, and after leaving him the rascal had not come back unless—

Davy always stopped right here as if the rest was a mystery, the bounds of which he was afraid to cross. Who was the dead man in the chair in the other room?

Was that man Dan Nicobar, and if so, who had killed him?

By and by the handkerchief which had closed his mouth so long slipped from its place and he felt like sending forth a cry for help. But on second thought he concluded to wait awhile, for to cry out might bring down upon him the very persons he did not want to meet and the captivity might be extended.

He began to work on his bonds as he had not worked before, and at the end of several hours' desperate work he slipped his hands loose and the rest was easy.

He sprang from the chair of torture with a cry he could not keep back. Free—free to go to Jason Clew with the story of the new crime—to tell him that a man filled a chair with a dagger in his heart—another crime by the Silver Dagger!

It was night when Davy Sharp found himself once more on the streets of New York.

He was as hungry as a wolf, and his eagerness did not turn him toward Jason Clew's little den till he had satisfied the inner man.

When he had done this, he sprang away and ran up the steps that led to the detective's den.

Davy found the door closed and locked, and his raps elicited no response.

"I won't go back to the major's house," he said. "I left some of my clothes there, but I'll let 'em go. Dan Nicobar is Major Phenix's right bower, and I'd be putting my head in a steel trap to go back thar ag'in. Jason will agree with me when we meet ag'in, and I want ter see him the worst kind."

In quitting the house, Davy had taken careful notes of his surroundings, and felt that he could conduct the ferret to the very spot where he had been imprisoned; but as he failed to find Jason Clew after a long hunt on the streets, and by going back once or twice to the office, he turned to the old trap on his own hook.

"I have a curiosity ter lift the handkerchief from the dead man's face," he muttered. "I kin get inside and none will be the wiser for my play. Ain't I Jason's pard, an' isn't it my duty ter find out all I kin? I'm going ter get at this mystery of which I hold the secret, an' when Jason an' me put our heads together, look a little out."

The boy sharp went back to the street, which he found without difficulty, and soon stood in front of the house.

He proceeded to the rear of the building and managed to creep inside.

In a short time he stood in the room where he had sat in the torture-chair, with the round hole in the wall before him.

He went to the opening and lighted a match.

"Heavens! I'm too late!" cried Davy Sharp. "There is no dead man in the chair now. They have taken the body off," and he continued to stare at the sight he now saw.

The chair was still there, but its dead occupant had vanished.

Davy Sharp managed to get into the room of mystery, and there he called another match into service.

There now remained not a single sign of the terrible tableau he had looked upon while lashed in the chair.

He searched the room, moving round and round it, but nothing rewarded him. The dead person had been removed without a trail being left behind, and when he came back to the chair and halted there, he felt most keenly the disappointment.

"This would puzzle Jason Clew himself," he smiled. "It wasn't a dream, for I was wide awake, and what I saw I saw; that's all. Is the house inhabited by any one? It seems deserted, and not a sound but the scampering of some rats did I hear all the time I was here."

Davy, the young ferret, went all over the place. He searched the house from top to bottom, going at last into the cellar, the door of which he had to force open, and there he stood a little while, with the match showing him a lot of cellar refuse—nothing more.

He came back to the real scene of the latest mystery.

"That was a door!" said the boy aloud, and the next moment he felt a cold chill sweep to his heart as he plunged into an old closet and fell back into the furthest corner.

Yes, a door had opened and shut.

For some time the boy in the closet hugged the dark corner, feeling strange things creeping down his back. Then the same noise was heard again.

Some one was in the house, but who?

He could not look out, like Jason Clew in Madame Medusa's secret chamber, therefore he was compelled to remain in the darkness, and see nothing that was transpiring outside.

At last he distinctly heard the person leave the room, and then he slipped out of the closet.

From there to the door was but a step, and in a minute the boy spy of the gutter stood once more in the open air, with the stars shining down upon him.

He crept to the front of the house, and all at once caught sight of a figure that came down the front steps.

"That's who was inside," said Davy, eying the man who hurried off, only to have the boy ferret at his heels. "This is getting as interesting as dangerous, and I'm beginning to like it."

He did not pause till he had run his quarry down—until he had tracked Jack Dunbar home, and saw him drop into a chair near a table, and give vent to an exclamation of joy.

With his face glued to the window-pane that served as a point of observation, Davy Sharp saw Jack greet a young girl who came in and stood in the middle of the room.

"That's the Inez of this hunt," mentally ejaculated the boy, watching the fair creature with peculiar interest. "That's the dumb girl what Jason talks about. She must be keeping house for that man who came to Major Phenix's with a proposition that met with a revolver. I saw that little side-play, and it did me good to see him tumble back from the gun, while he turned all colors."

Inez did not move forward till a sign from Jack summoned her, and then she stopped near him, with her hand on the edge of the table.

Jack was looking into the eyes of the dumb girl with great curiosity, as the spy could see. He seemed to be studying her, as if he were mentally calculating how much she would be worth to him under certain circumstances.

"Have you been here all the time since I've been gone?" Jack suddenly asked.

Inez, who had watched his lips, nodded slightly.

"You want to be on the watch, as I've told you," continued Jack. "There's a man on your trail whom you don't want to see, and besides that there's also a woman who is to be shunned. Ah, you know who I am talking about now, for you've had a good deal of experience with the old hag, Daniz. Beware of that creature!" and Jack leaned forward and caught the gaze of Inez. "You must not fall back into the clutches of Daniz. Do everything in your power to avoid her. It can be done by remaining shut up here for a spell. It won't be very long, for the game is going to be played out ere long. Yes, Inez, the play is nearly done, and then we will go away and never see this city any more."

For a moment the sadness always enthroned on the mute girl's face, seemed to leave it and it brightened suddenly.

"Don't you want to go away, Inez?" asked Jack.

Another nod.

"I thought so. Don't you know that you may have been seen in Medusa's house by some one besides me?"

The girl stood rigid now.

"I don't say that you have been seen there, Inez, but you took great risk in going. I don't see why you should take a notion to plunge a dagger into the chair. Why, you have ripped up the back of old Medusa's seat but fortunately you were not seen—that is, I hope you were not—by the detective."

Quick as a flash Inez tore some paper from her bosom and wrote rapidly thereon.

"I don't give up my secrets. You know that, Jack," the man read aloud.

"That's right. I did not think you did," he said to her. "By and by we can make that secret worth a good deal to us. You know it as well as I do, and together we will work the mine. Inez, my dear, what we know the ferrets would pay well for."

Once more the mute girl smiled and put the pencil to the paper.

"I don't want to make anything out of the secret I hold," read Jack aloud as before, for he did not think of any listeners. "I am almost tired of living. It is terrible to be silent and dumb all one's life, and, besides, to carry to the grave a secret which is so dark and terrible. I don't want to go back to old Daniz. I am willing to trust you, Jack."

He laughed as he looked up from the paper.

"You won't have to sell the secret. I will attend to that myself and you won't be in the trade at all," he said.

Inez shook her head.

"But, tell me one thing, Inez. You've hinted at it before, but have refused to disclose it. What became of the papers which old Medusa used to say were worth their weight in gold as against a certain man—you know who?"

The girl seemed to recoil from the man with a gesture of aversion.

"You don't want to tell me, do you," he cried, sternly. "You know where those documents are. You have seen Medusa hide them—somewhere in the wall I suppose, and, what is more, you know where the secret spring is."

The girl's hand did not drop to the paper that rested beneath it.

"Keep it if you want to," the man said, madly. "You have no sense of gratitude. If I had not brought you from under old Daniz's eye where would you be to-night? Why, the detective might have you in his grip, and to-morrow you might be on the witness stand, writing out for a court of justice the secret you are guarding so well from me. Is this what you call gratitude, girl? What if I should let you fall into the hands of the police? They want to know who killed Madame Medusa; they want the very secret you hold in your bosom. What if I should abandon you to them?"

The statuesque figure of the girl moved suddenly. It bent over the table, a flash in her black eyes, as Davy Sharp could see, and in a moment she was writing out an answer which seemed a "defy."

"She's got her dander up," said the boy, as he watched her and saw, too, how Jack Dunbar regarded her. "What will he say to that?"

This time Jack did not read the reply aloud. He clutched the paper, read it in a second, and sprung up.

"You will, will you?" he cried, seizing Inez's arm as she drew back. "There is the door! Carry out your threat if you think you can afford it; but, remember, if you do that, I will turn against you, and that you may fall into hands ten times as dangerous as Daniz's!"

Davy Sharp held his breath as he looked.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DEFIANT BEAUTY.

NOT long after Davy Sharp's adventure, Jason Clew heard footsteps climb his stairs, and the next moment the opening of the door revealed the grinning face of the boy shadow.

Davy came in with a greeting which told the ferret that he had something for him, and in a little while he was listening to the scene between Jack Dunbar and the beautiful dumb girl.

"Inez is afraid to quit the man's den, but you see she threatened him with something and her eyes fairly flashed. Captain Jason, do you know who that girl is?"

The detective shook his head.

Probably he thought of the half-revealed secret of Noah Moneybox, and wondered what it would have been if death had kept his distance a little while longer.

It was plain to him that the mute girl was in the power of the man of the Silver Dagger, the slick, soft-handed Jack Dunbar.

"I intend to get at the bottom of the mystery in a few hours," he said to his young friend. "You don't want to go back to the major's house, Davy?"

"I will go wherever you say," was the prompt response. "But I guess I would run a big risk in going back, right away. You know under what circumstances I quitted the mansion, and—"

"You don't think Nydia, the maid, would betray you?"

"Not she! She don't like one hair on the major's head and she is there only because she likes Lorene."

The detective smiled.

When the boy had gone he went below and proceeded to the house in which Davy had spent some hours lashed to a chair.

"The mystery of the new crime—the killing of the man whom Davy saw with his face covered, is something I would like to get at," he murmured. "The boy says he was killed with a Silver Dagger. Who did it? That is what I want to know."

A search of the premises promised to reveal the ferret nothing, when he suddenly stooped and picked up a small button at which he looked with a half smile.

"Something for the young fox in my employ," he said to himself, and hunting Davy up he showed him his find.

"That belongs to Jack!" cried Davy Sharp.

"Go slow," was the reply. "Look again and tell me for certain."

"He wore buttons like it while talking to Inez."

Here was a clew, but as yet the sharp had no real knowledge of a murder; all he knew was what the boy spy had told him.

That night Jack Dunbar, elegantly dressed, went up the steps of Major Phenix's house and, with the audacity of Mephistopheles, rung the bell.

The reader will remember his last visit to the mansion—how his demand on the major for Lorene was coolly met by a leveled revolver; but here he was again as cool as ever.

Jack Dunbar swung his figure into the parlor and finding himself alone, took a seat and crossed his legs.

For a time he was not disturbed, but all at once he heard a step and as he looked over his shoulder the major himself strode forward.

In an instant a scowl darkened the handsome face of the man of M— street; but he came on until he confronted his caller.

"I am back," smiled Jack, with the look of a man who had resolved to play a desperate hand, as if it were his last resort.

"I see," was the answer as Major Phenix took a seat and eyed Jack.

"I've come for a square answer to my proposition. You took an unfair advantage of me the other time and I will now say briefly that I want yes or no."

The very coolness of the speaker was enough to startle the major.

"You shall have it," and he was going to say more when he suddenly caught the man's eye.

Major Phenix stopped abruptly.

"Don't go off like powder," said Jack. "Think before you speak, for this proposition won't be made again. I want the girl—I want Lorene. She is yours to bestow."

A pallor came over the face of the man of the League.

"Major, we don't want to become enemies, and I will not if I can help it. You know what I know and how I have served you and the League. I have done my part, keeping my oath at the risk of my life. I have been hunted by the police and the ferret has been on my trail. I am still in the Circle and still acknowledge you as my leader. We can't afford to be anything but friends. We must not fall out at this stage of the game and all I want is a promise—one which I know you can make—that I shall, in time, become the husband of the girl called Lorene."

This time the speaker was not confronted by a revolver. This time the hand of Major Phenix did not lift over the edge of the table a six-shooter into which Jack Dunbar could look for his reply.

Instead of such a demonstration he merely leaned forward and after a quick glance at the door, said:

"Would you treat her well?"

"Wouldn't I?" cried Jack. "Lorene would, in time, become the happiest girl on earth. I know where one can live down the past and where the secrets of the Silver Dagger may be kept safe from all mortal ken. I am capable of becoming somebody besides Jack Dunbar."

It was with a curious look that Major Phenix now regarded Jack.

Probably he was thinking of Dan Nicobar and the pledge he had made to that worthy in writing.

Lorene had been sold once; dare he sell her again?

"Yes or no, major?" said Jack after a brief silence. "Perhaps you are thinking of another little promise that may stand in your way. If you are, let me show you that it will never trouble you."

The next moment Jack's hand was taken from his pocket and there fell upon the table at his elbow a piece of paper.

Catching it up with wonder in his eye, Major Phenix made a startling discovery.

It was the very pledge he had made to Nicobar!

"Dan has no use for that," said Jack. "He will not call to have it redeemed. In fact, he has stepped from the drama, and if you won't ask any questions but will treat my proposition with consideration, you need never dream of that paper or its former holder troubling you."

"May I burn it?" asked the major.

"It is yours."

In a moment the major was holding the promise over the flame of the jet and both men looked at it while it was consumed.

"What is your answer?" asked Jack.

Major Phenix looked across the table and seemed to be measuring thoughts with the man there.

"She is yours!" he suddenly said.

There was no flush of triumph on Jack Dunbar's face, though he had gained a remarkable victory. He had triumphed over the man who had repulsed him and while he sat there looking into the major's face he must have thought of this.

"I will call her down," said the major, putting out his hand for a bell.

An instant later the tones of the call-bell rung through the house and presently there came down the stairs footsteps which halted opposite the door and Lorene stood before them.

Never before had the girl looked so beautiful.

Tall and statuesque, with eyes that seemed to shine, she stood there, looking first at the major and then at the man who had played for her.

She seemed to know that she had been summoned into the parlor on an important matter and waited for one of the two to speak.

"Lorene, my child, look at this gentleman," said the major with a smile at the corners of his mouth. "This is Mr. Jack Dunbar, but he is no stranger to you. I have just concluded with him a treaty which concerns you and your future. It is the desire of my heart, as you know, to see you happy and the wife of one whom you can trust and love. Lorene, behold in the gentleman with us to-night the person I have chosen as your husband."

Jack left his chair and executed a bow which under the circumstances, grave as they were, was ridiculous.

Lorene drew off and suddenly covered the smirking Jack with her finger.

"What became of the other one?" she cried.

"This is not the man to whom you sold me some time since. This is not Nicobar, the fiend with the velvet tread."

"No, but a better man in every respect."

"I thought all tigers were alike," was the sudden answer. "They are to me, at least. So this one is to become my lord? This is the tiger to whom you have thrown me?"

She came in and walked toward the half-dazed Jack, who was eying her with feelings not to be described. Never before had he seen her in such cutting passion.

"I refuse to obey," was the reply. "You may sell, but I will not pass into the hands of the purchaser."

Major Phenix looked at Dunbar with a comical expression.

"I refuse to confirm the infamous bargain!" Lorene continued. "Is this the man to look after my future welfare? Is this the proper one to protect me? Why, he would destroy, not build up. This is the well-known Jack Dunbar, the man of a dozen names, and not one of them untainted. You see I know something about my future husband. I have not been idle during my life under this roof. I know something of the past and a good deal of the present. I repudiate the bargain!"

There was nothing demonstrative about the girl's reply. She spoke with the coolness of a desperate woman who measures every word before it leaves her lips; her bright eyes even twinkled at times during her reply.

Jack Dunbar was inclined to get warm under the collar, but he saw that it would not advance his cause.

"You will change your opinion of me in time," he said. "I am not the black scoundrel you have evidently painted me. I am capable of becoming something good."

"You, Jack Dunbar?" laughed Lorene. "How much time will that transformation occupy?"

The villain bit his lips.

"It is done, anyhow," he cried, looking at her. "You can't oppose the promise that has been made. Major Phenix is your legal guardian, and you dare not resist his command."

"Did you pledge him that I shall become his wife?" she exclaimed. "What made you break your promise to Dan Nicobar?"

"He broke it himself. He sent back the agreement!"

"By whose hand?"

The major glanced at the man across the table.

"By you?" cried Lorene turning upon Jack.

"So he sent back the paper by you?"

For the first time during the interview the man of the Silver Dagger winced.

"I refuse!" continued Lorene. "I will not become the wife of a man whom I do not love. I will not consent to the infamous union proposed by that man."

She had turned to the major, but was pointing at Jack Dunbar.

"He can't show a clean pair of hands. His hands are red with blood. There, don't lose color and glare, Mr. Dunbar. I know what you have been in the past. Do you think that a man can go to prison and come out never to have his old crimes thrown up to him? What are you? Who used to tell your fortune and when did you see her last? Don't squirm in your chair, you miserable rascal, but sit still till I have done and look me in the eye. Major Phenix is called my

guardian; he is said to exercise over me that sway which a father is generally supposed to exercise over the welfare of a daughter. All that is pretty when one talks about it. My father? Let him look me in the eye for I am going to say something to both of you. I am not that man's child. He has no right to sell me to any one. I am Lorene, but not Lorene Phenix. I am the child of another. Look at him, Jack Dunbar. It is his turn to appear white-faced and he has turned so. Both of you men belong to what is known as the Silver Dagger. I won't go into the history of it. What, do you think I know nothing concerning it? Fools! I have not lived in ignorance of the past because I have been kept shut up in this house.

"I know what the Dagger has done. I know why it came into existence. I know who some of its victims have been and just now, with the best detectives of New York on the trail of that blade, you get together and map out my future. Why? You want a wife, Jack Dunbar, while Major Phenix there sells me to save himself."

Lorene ceased and had the gaze of the two men riveted upon her.

"All this is true. And now do you think I will submit to the bargain?" she cried. "A thousand times no! I quit this house now and forever!"

She sprang across the floor and Major Phenix with a cry rushed after her.

Jack filled his chair with a blanched face and a muttered curse.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A YOUNG FERRET'S FIND.

"Do you think she will carry out her threat?" asked Jack when the major came back, his face as white as a sheet and his lips welded. "Do you fear her?"

"I know the girl and will take care of her."

"Then you will promise that the bargain we have made will be carried out?"

"To the letter, so far as I'm concerned," was the quick response. "I am still the man I have been in the past, and you know me."

Jack Dunbar smiled.

"There is one other thing to be done now. The ferret must be caged—this time for good."

"I understand."

"Of the many ferrets in the city Jason Clew is the one to be feared most. He was in Daniz's trap, but effected his escape. He has been known to escape from traps that never lost any other captive, and if we let him get away from us we will be the only sufferers."

There was no answer.

Lorene had gone up the broad stair, and the sound of her footstep was no longer heard.

"I am going to leave the entrapping of this man to you," continued Major Phenix. "I shall turn him over to you for silencing, only stipulating that there shall be no mistake in any play against him, but that the work be done thoroughly and with dispatch."

"It shall be as you wish."

Jack was crossing the room, when he was stopped.

"What has become of the girl?" asked Major Phenix.

"Inez?"

"Yes."

Jack Dunbar, with the coolness of a liar, shook his head.

"I learn that she is somewhere beyond the keen eye of old Daniz. This should not be."

"Is Inez dangerous?"

"To the cause? Yes. We must look after her."

"What does she know?"

In a moment the face of the nabob of M—street underwent a sudden change.

"You ought to know that she should be under the eye of some one all the time," he said. "I don't want Inez at liberty, and though I have told Daniz that she must find her within a given time, I fear the old woman will fail."

Jack could have told the major something concerning the whereabouts of the beautiful mute, but he did not volunteer the wished-for information, and in a short time he was once more on the street, with a queer smile on his face.

"I have won this time," he muttered. "I thought I could bring him to terms. This time he didn't venture to confront me with the revolver, for good sense told him that I held the winning cards and he had to knock under. I am to entrap the detective, not a very congenial task, but one which must be undertaken without a show of fear. This man is closing in on the League; he is picking up link by link the chain of evidence against us and if he is permitted to pick up a few more the chain will be complete and the game played out."

Jack went back to the room where Davy Sharp witnessed the interview between him and Inez, the dumb.

He found the little place deserted and when he walked to the table his eye caught sight of a bit of paper sticking out from under a paper-weight.

Snatching it up the handsome member of the Silver Dagger glanced at its contents and swore roundly.

"You have dared me to carry out my threat. Though you have befriended me you have gone too far. If we should meet in the future believe me that I will remember your kindness though I cannot forget what I know concerning the crime of the Silver Dagger."

"Gone!" said Jack. "I might have looked for this. If she falls into old Daniz's hands she will be returned to prison, but I don't want her to drop back into that hag's clutches. I am the person to see to Inez."

He clutched the little message madly and for a moment looked half vacantly toward the door, as if he expected to see it open and admit some one.

"I am going to make one more visit to the old house," he said when, disguised so that his intimates would not have known him, he went down to the street and moved off at a rapid gait.

"The old house" meant the scene of some of the most exciting incidents of our story and in due time, Jack Dunbar found himself in Madame Medusa's chamber of magic.

The room was dark and still, but the Silver Dagger struck a light and soon had the place illumined so that he could see everything.

"Somewhere in this house must lie concealed those papers which I happen to know she prepared in secret. She wrote out the true history of her life, throwing light upon many dark places in her early career. She revealed in those documents as she once told me she would, the story of Inez's parentage and some other things which, if I possessed them, would prove a veritable bonanza and give me cards which I could play at any time and win a fortune."

Jack Dunbar went to work to systematically search the house and his mien told that he would not quit it until it had been thoroughly explored.

From room to room he went, sounding the walls for secret buttons and looking into the dark places in hopes of striking the trail he sought.

He stood at last in a chamber on the top floor. The ceiling was low and the floor covered with a worm-eaten carpet.

"I am sure that the papers which I saw Inez snatch from Major Phenix's hands in this house are not the ones I am after," he said to himself. They may have been important but they cannot be the ones I want to feel in my hands."

He had not noticed that the room in which he found himself had no window, that it was nearly round, and that it was totally stripped of furniture of every description.

Aided by the little light which he carried in his hand, Jack searched the place, and, to his disgust, discovered nothing.

He was on the eve of quitting the chamber when a slight noise attracted him, and the door which he had closed opened.

In an instant the hand of the Silver Dagger went to his side, and the revolver which he drew clicked as he fell back with eyes fastened on the portal.

But, to his surprise, no one presented himself, and he looked till a cold chill took possession of his heart.

"There's no telling what magic the witch of Gotham left behind her," he suddenly laughed. "The house is a net-work of mystery, and one-half of it has never been found out."

He went out and down the steps to the room below. All at once in the lower hall he stopped and again half-drew the six-shooter.

Half a minute later he saw a moving light, and that instant shut off the beams of his own.

Jack Dunbar leaned against the cold walls of the corridor and prepared for an encounter. The noise he had heard told him that some one else was in the old house, and while he waited there he tried to conjecture who it was.

"This is the queerest place I ever got into," said a voice, at the sound of which the Silver Dagger smiled. "It's worse than the place on the street where I saw the dead man in the chair with the handkerchief over his face."

"Heavens!" cried Jack. "That person knows too much."

In a little while the light came toward him again, and he saw the speaker.

It was a boy.

At first Jack was inclined to laugh outright, but the next second such intention was driven from his mind.

"That's the young ferret who follows Jason Clew," he said. "He is now at work for his master, and I may learn something by watching him."

Davy Sharp had come to the house of mystery as well as Jack, and now stood in the room holding a light in his hand, and looking around in a manner that convinced the man that he knew what he had come for.

Jack saw the boy through the open door of the hall, where he hugged the wall, and fell to watching him like a tiger.

Presently Davy crossed over to one of the walls and put up his hand. The bronzed fingers moved over the wall a moment, and then a door opened.

"That's one of them," muttered the man on the watch. "That's one of the secret doors for which this house is famous. Now, what is the boy ferret going to do?"

Davy picked up his light and held it inside the door. His lithe figure was a sore temptation to Jack, who could have bounded forward and seized it before the boy was aware of his presence; but he restrained himself and continued to look.

All at once light and boy disappeared beyond the secret door, but in a moment both reappeared, and Jack to his astonishment saw in the boy's hand a packet, at sight of which his heart seemed to leap into his throat.

"That's the very thing I want," he thought. "The boy ferret has found the hidden history of a life for his master, the detective. I must not let him get away."

There was a grin of triumph on Davy Sharp's face when he emerged from the secret room, and Jack could not help noticing it. Davy's eyes fairly snapped.

All at once the man tiger in the dark took a great stride toward the boy.

As yet Davy was not aware of the nearness of any one, and when Jack saw this, he chuckled to himself and tried to anticipate the young ferret's fright.

Suddenly there fell near the boy with the papers a footstep that caused him to look up.

The next moment he stood face to face with Jack Dunbar!

"Ho!" cried Davy, nearly dropping the light; and then he looked at the man with a grin as if he did not fear him for all the shock he had just given him.

Jack gazed at the boy a moment and then said with his eyes fastened on the packet in the little brown hands:

"You've found something. I guess I'll take it."

Davy glanced down at the papers and then up into Jack's face.

"It don't belong to you."

"That's all right, but I'll take it all the same."

Davy Sharp fell back a foot and Jack advanced.

"Here, hand it over."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. I want what you have just taken from the secret room at your back."

"Oh, that is it, eh? Well, there they are—the old witch's papers, I mean. I hope you'll find 'em interesting. I don't want any trouble and I won't make any."

The packet fell upon the table with a little cloud of dust ascending and Davy resumed:

"You seem to be pleased, whoever you are. You'll let me go now?"

"Yes."

Davy was seen to mark a certain spot on the wall and as he reached it he said:

"I've got other papers in my pocket. You won't get them. They tell the whole story of Madame Medusa's life."

There was an oath and a bound on Jack Dunbar's part, but when he reached the wall the boy ferret was gone and he could not find the secret button.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OLD DANIZ'S SECRET.

THE maddest man in New York was Jack Dunbar when he left the old house of magic.

He had nothing in his hands, for an examination of the papers which he had captured from Davy Sharp showed them to be nothing but a lot of old horoscopes which were of no value and he had burned them all before leaving.

The boy ferret had escaped with the documents of actual value and in all probability had carried them to Jason Clew, the very man who knew their true worth.

Gliding like a shadow up one street and down another, Jack reached his own den, where he began to reflect over what had occurred and to plan for Jason Clew's destruction.

"Why didn't I think of it before?" he cried, springing up and seizing his hat. "Old Daniz was to have found Inez within a given time. Has she succeeded? I must know."

Old Daniz, after her exciting interview with the woman who had choked her secret from her, had not found the missing mute. She was the only occupant of a dingy little room when Jack climbed the stairs and knocked at the door.

"It is I," said Jack, and then the portal opened half suspiciously and was locked the moment he had crossed the threshold.

Daniz, the Dago, falling back, looked at Jack with a dark face and blood-shot eye.

"Well, what have you done toward finding Inez?"

The old hag started at the sound of the name and shook her head.

"You haven't found her yet?"

"No. Have you come to carry out his threat?"

"What threat?"

"The major's. I was to receive the Silver Dagger if I did not find Inez within so long a time. I haven't found her and, what is more, with that ferret looking for me I can't go into the street."

Jack laughed.

"I thought you were cooler than that. Why, old woman, there was a time when this detec-

tive would not have turned a hair on your head.

"That time is not now," was the reply. "I am old and nearly tired of being hunted from pillar to post. I am not the young woman who lifted her hand to heaven and swore to stand by the Silver Dagger in all its workings. I am not the Daniz of other days."

"Don't go into these things. They don't interest me. I see before me one who wants to retire from the game."

"You do."

"Have you tried to find Inez since her escape?"

"I dare not go out with this shadow on the trail."

"Will you let me take this task off your hands, Daniz?"

In a flash the old face brightened.

"You will make me your debtor for life!" she exclaimed. "You will have the lasting gratitude of Daniz. Take the task off my hands? Yes, yes. It is yours."

She came forward and would have seized him in her paroxysm of delight, if Jack had not waved her off.

"But you must do something for me," said he, looking down into her eyes.

"Anything, anything!" cried Daniz.

For a single moment Jack looked like a person who had just achieved a victory.

"I will take this task off your hands—I will stand between you and the Silver Dagger; but you must give me something for my work."

"Go on."

Jack Dunbar dropped into a chair, and looked at the creature standing before him.

"Daniz, I am only going to ask for a little secret—one which I believe you possess," he went on. "I am working a little affair on my own hook, and there is just one thing I want to know."

Silence fell between the pair, and Daniz waited with feverish impatience for the rest.

"Daniz, who was Madame Medusa?"

If a thunderbolt had fallen in that room the old hag would not have recoiled in a more startling manner.

"I—can't—tell—you—that," she gasped.

"Not if I assume your allotted task?"

Daniz was silent.

"Come, woman; you know what the Dagger can do—"

"And what it has done!" was the retort. "I know all this, and yet you ask me for a secret which is locked up in the old house. Why don't you go and look for it?"

In an instant Jack thought of his adventure in the house of magic, and bit his lip.

"You won't tell me?" he said.

"I can't."

"Very well. I will not only not stand between you and the needle-pointed dagger, but I will tell the master that you absolutely refuse to look for Inez."

The figure of the Dago sunk into a chair, and for a little while Jack Dunbar watched her with a mad light in his eyes.

"Keep your secret," he suddenly cried. "Keep it and take the consequences. I will not assume your task. The girl will be found by some one, but you will be held responsible for her escape."

"Hold me so, then," cried Daniz, with sudden resolution. "Hold me so. Tell him that I refuse to hunt for the dumb girl—that I will not put myself in the ferret's way. I know something about him. Twice entrapped and as often escaped."

Jack arose and advanced to the door. With his hand resting on the knob, he looked back at Daniz.

"Who was she?" he asked.

"Ask the person who killed her," was the reply. "Ask the person who wielded the silver dagger that night. Hunt up Noah Moneybox, and see whether you can't extract some information from him. You know it was he who found her dead in her chair, and that he put this ferret of ferrets on the trail. Go to him."

"Where is he?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Daniz. "Where is old Noah, sure enough? And what has become of our other friend, Dan Nicobar?"

Jack started slightly at the last question.

"For the last time, woman, won't you tell me?"

"For the last time I answer you, Jack—no!"

The door was pulled open and the Silver Dagger stepped into the narrow and almost lightless hall beyond.

He looked back and saw the tall and nearly fleshless figure of Daniz standing in the light of her lamp, and for a moment thought he saw it transformed into a shadow that seemed to move ghost-like toward the furthest wall.

"She knows, curse her, and the secret would be worth much to me. It is the only trump out of my hand. I would have Major Phenix completely in my power, and, instead of he being the head of the Dagger League, I would be there. I've half a notion to go back and choke it out of her."

He stood undecided in the hall a moment too long, for all at once Daniz sprung across the room and slammed the door in his face. He heard the bolt shoot back in its place; heard,

too, the laugh of victory that rose from the old hag's lips, and as he went down-stairs with a grated curse, he seemed to hear the echo of that same outburst of merriment.

"I am in the toils now," said Daniz, while the tread of Jack died away on the steps. "No matter what I do I am doomed to be hunted by a dagger. Why not go and tell the truth? Why not be honest once in a lifetime? Have I the courage? I know where he lives when he is not on the trail. I have seen him go up to his den there to plan how to entrap the guilty. If I hide here I will be found by the dagger. If I go abroad I may be followed by it. I will try to find him—the man I fear. I will go out and seek the shadow of New York, and he shall hear from lips that know, a secret that may place him between me and the needle-pointed blade."

Old Daniz made a toilet which, to some extent, changed her identity.

She slipped from the room and went down upon the street. With the tread of a cat she sneaked along, keeping in the shadows up one street and down another. Every footstep that assailed her ears was to her that of a tracker armed with the dagger she feared, but against which she was now working.

At last she reached a building which she seemed to recognize.

Daniz climbed a stairway in the dark, but found a door overhead.

She saw a light beyond the keyhole, and for a moment hesitated with her hand on the knob.

But old Daniz had not come thus far to go back.

With a quick motion she turned the knob, but the door did not yield.

"Not at home!" she cried. "I have exposed myself to the new enemy for nothing."

The following moment the sounds of footsteps came across the room beyond the door.

"Ah, he is here!" she cried.

She turned back as the door opened and a man stood before her.

Without a word Daniz sprung into the room, and seizing the hand she saw, cried:

"Shut the door, for Heaven's sake! They must not see me here. I am a doomed woman—hunted by the dagger that never fails to find its victim."

The door, already shut, seemed to tell her that a barrier had been placed between her heart and the blade she feared, for she fell back with a cry of delight and smiled at the man who was looking at her.

"You are Jason Clew? I am Daniz; but you know that."

"Yes, I have tried your trap," and the man who had turned upon the Dago was looking at her with intense curiosity mingled with unbounded surprise.

"I have come to give you the secret. I am going to reveal a woman's past, and tell you who the witch of Gotham was."

"Ah!" thought Jason. "The secret that died with Noah Moneybox."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

WITH Jason Clew, the ferret, on the threshold of a secret, let us turn for a moment to another scene, and see one of the characters of our romance in a role he had seldom played.

At the very hour when Jason Clew was confronted by Daniz, the Dago, in his little den, Major Phenix, kid-gloved and refined in his dress, with a self-satisfied air, was seated in a parlor not his own, evidently waiting for some one to enter, for he watched a certain door with a good deal of interest.

He did not have to wait long, for it opened and there came forward a man, who looked at the nabob of M— street and bowed as he crossed the room.

"To whom am I indebted for this call?" asked the person who confronted the major.

Major Phenix extended a card, which the man took and read under the gas.

"I see! I am glad to know you, though you are not an entire stranger to me."

The speaker was not so old as the major, but was the handsomer of the two. There was about him the air of one who has riches at his command, but who is very careful who he receives into his house.

"I learn that you sometimes loan large sums," said Major Phenix, watching the face before him.

The man nodded.

"I want an accommodation; and to show you that I am able to secure you, will show you the contents of this little box."

As he spoke, the man of the Silver Dagger took from his pocket a small box, which, when he had untied the string which secured it, turned out to be not over four inches in length.

"Here are the securities I propose to offer for the loan," and he handed the box to the other while he settled back in his chair with evident satisfaction.

When the box was opened a lot of diamonds blazed therein and drew from the person who stared at them an exclamation of wonder.

"How much do you want?" asked that person without looking up.

"Ten thousand."

"And you will leave these stones with me?"
"Yes."

"I am very glad that I am able to accommodate you. These are family gems, are they not?"

"You may call them so. Yes, they once belonged to one of the noblest families of Italy and have come to me through an honest channel. They are worth double the amount I want, and, being gems with a value besides their intrinsic worth, you will at once understand why I do not sell them outright."

The box of diamonds was replaced in the major's hands, and the other person counted out on the table the amount of money desired by the nabob.

Ten minutes later Major Phenix was on the street again and when he stopped it was in a second-story room, where he looked into the face of a person who sat in a chair.

"You don't come often," said this person, who was a man of sixty, with a hatchet-face, and the black, piercing eyes of a lynx.

"I don't have to," was the response.

There was a little vinegar in the major's tones.

"You needn't be so short about it. You are not all you are supposed to be. I know some things which I guess you wouldn't like to have repeated beyond this door of mine. No, you don't come very often, and I can't say that I'm very sorry you don't."

Major Phenix leaned toward the man who seemed fastened to the chair by some disease and said:

"I am here to pay you the last installment of that old debt."

"You are, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's more than I ever thought you would do."

"You doubted my word, then?"

"I did. I had good reasons for doubting it. You are going to pay me, are you? Well, you never can entirely cancel that account. You know why."

There was no reply to these words, and Major Phenix took from his pocket the money he had just received and counted out one thousand dollars which he placed on the table before the man.

The black eyes counted the bills as he laid them down, and when the last one had dropped upon the pile they were suddenly lifted.

"When did you see my sister last?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't keep any account of the woman. Why should I? Do you want to see her?"

"Yes, for once in my life I want to see Pauline."

"What do you think ever became of her?"

"I don't know. I heard once that she became a fortune-telling witch—that she had dupes by the thousand, and more than once I dreamed about her. By the way, not long ago there was a fortune-teller murdered in this city. I got a paper from a boy, and it had an account of the crime. Do you think that could have been Pauline?"

"I never paid any attention to the deed, though, since you have mentioned it, I believe I did hear something of it at the time."

"I couldn't get far away from my chair, you know, on account of my deformity, therefore I could not discover what became of Pauline and whether she was a clairvoyant or not. But, never mind, we won't trouble ourselves very much about her."

Major Phenix seemed to smile to himself.

"Are you satisfied with what I have given you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Perfectly satisfied?"

"Perfectly. You have paid good interest on the last of the debt. How are you making it now?"

"O, I'm getting along, but I sha'n't remain here."

"How's the girl?"

This question was put in a whisper.

Some color left the nabob's face.

"She's grown."

"Of course. She must have been a woman several years."

Major Phenix nodded.

"Is she pretty?"

"Very."

"Not married yet?"

"No."

"You're attending to that, I'll warrant. Watch out. She may want to break from you. There's money in that girl if she is pretty and in your hands. What ever became of her mother?"

"I don't know."

"Let me see. How long has it been since?"

"I don't concern myself about the years that have passed."

"They're all I have to think about!" said the other. "You don't let them bother you. Do you ever hear from my old partner?—she must be as old as I am now."

"Daniz?"

"Yes, yes—the woman who helped me that night. I will never forget it. It was all I could do to hold her back while Daniz did the deed. Ha, I can't help laughing when I think of it. I

live here so quietly that no one knows that we are acquainted at all. I am satisfied to be here though deformed for life. I presume I shall never see Pauline, though I would like to know if the old witch who was killed with a silver dagger, as the papers said, were she. Such strange things are quite liable to happen, you know."

Major Phenix seemed eager to go, but the man in the chair held him there.

"I like to have some one to talk to and, then, you don't come very often, you see. You are looking well, but you appear to have aged a little. We all do that more or less. So you don't know where Daniz is, the baby has developed into a pretty woman, and you can't tell me what became of my sister, Pauline?"

There was no answer.

"One more question, major."

"Go on."

"Did the detectives ever discover the murderer of the old witch?"

"They never found a clew."

"Nice fellows they are!" laughed the other.

"Not a clew for these sharpers of the trail. Why, the papers said the killer left the weapon of death in the bosom of his victim. That was foolish on his part."

"But it gave the police nothing to work on."

"That's strange; but the assassin knew what he was doing."

Once more Major Phenix went toward the door, the eyes of the occupant of the seat riveted upon him.

"Good-by," he said, looking back.

"When will you come again?"

"I can't say that."

"Never?"

"It may be never."

"Then shake hands."

With a smile the major came back and shook hands with the old man.

All at once he was drawn downward until the lips of the other almost touched his ear.

"Be careful! Don't let them find you out. It's an old affair, but the laws of this country punish years after the doing of the deed. I won't be long here, and they won't find me when I'm wanted. Of course I would not turn against you. I wish I could see Pauline once more. She used to be a pretty girl, so much younger than myself. If you find her out, tell her where I am, but prepare me for the visit. A shock might kill me."

Major Phenix straightened and fell back. As the hands of the two men separated a light footfall was heard and the nabob started.

"Who are your neighbors in this house?" he asked.

"Good people who never eavesdrop. But good-by. Come again."

As Major Phenix turned away he saw the skinny hands of the old man clutch the pile of bills, and then he went out.

"He reminds me a little of old Noah," he said to himself. "I guess the old money-fist won't appear on the stage any more. Ha, ha, my last visit to him did the job, but there's no telling where he died, for I can't find out anything about him."

As for the man left behind by Major Phenix, he looked at the bills, and then caught them up, with a sharp cry.

"I hate myself for my part in that theft of a child," he said, through clinched teeth. "I wonder what ever became of the mother? I would like to see Daniz, who helped me. I wonder if that man has paid her in full? This money is the wages of crime. It is the last installment, which he has kept back so many years. Major Phenix, you ought to be hung. You have raised in ignorance of her real parentage a child who was stolen by these hands. You started a little when I asked about Pauline. She became a fortune-teller; I am almost sure of this. I want to know what became of her. Why, I haven't heard from Pauline for years and years. No doubt she caught a husband, for she was beautiful; but why should she turn clairvoyant? Curse you," he was glaring at the bills, "I hate you all, and I'll give you a taste of what my soul deserves for that one deed."

He pushed his chair toward the jet and deliberately held the notes in the flame until a thousand dollars had dropped in black ashes at his feet.

"I'll sleep to-night," he said. "But may human, as well as divine justice, overtake us all!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHAT OLD DANIZ TOLD.

THE reader may imagine the interest that controlled Jason Clew when he found himself face to face with old Daniz from whose den he had twice escaped.

She had told him that she had come to reveal a dark secret and when she leaned back in her chair, with a glance at the door as if to make sure that they were not to be disturbed, he waited for her to proceed as he had never before waited for a revelation.

"You want to know, don't you?" said Daniz, her eyes glistening like twin gems. "You want to know who Madame Medusa was and I am the woman who can tell you."

"If you really intend to tell me this secret, go on."

"Years ago a babe was born in Italy and when she grew to womanhood she was one of the most beautiful of her sex. Already Pauline Mataffi had lovers by the score, but above them all she bestowed her heart upon a handsome young man somewhat older than herself. There was an unwritten law in the house of Mataffi that no member of it should wed a hated foreigner and the lover of the beautiful and ambitious Pauline was not an Italian."

"The girl really loved the man she had chosen and when she discovered that she would incur the lasting hatred of her family and bring down upon her head the vengeance of the 'Dorafia,' a secret society to which some members of it belonged, she fled with him and for a time was lost to sight. She went first to France where she became the bride of her lover and, after a residence there, the pair came to America. Mark Marigold was a schemer from his youth; he had twice been punished for secret crimes, and when he first made love to Pauline he was fresh from an Austrian prison, the marks of which he carried on his person. He had a penchant for forming secret societies and several whose head he became had to be broken up by the police. All of these schemes netted him a good deal of money and Pauline was drawn into them, against her will at first, for, for the sake of her child, which had come into the world, never to speak her name, she wanted to keep beyond the semblance of crime. But by and by she yielded to the importunities of the man she worshiped and plunged with him and his followers into the secret crimes of the leagues which he organized."

"The husband tired at last of his wife and Pauline in a moment of madness attempted to kill him and then fled from his roof. A divorce was procured and in a short time he had taken another wife who soon after lost her mind and ran to the river one night in mid-winter and disappeared. A strange career was now ahead for Pauline. She went from pillar to post for some years, passed the first years of her separation in a struggle for bread and finally won it. Her child, slowly growing up, was put out and did not know who was her mother."

"At last there appeared on the fortune-telling stage of New York a woman who in a short time met with marvelous success. She had dupes by the score, and soon was at the head of the black art in this great city. No one who had seen Pauline in her younger days dreamed that she was the mistress of the art of duping the people with her dark magic, for she had changed very much besides keeping to herself the secret of her past."

"Madame Medusa was Pauline Mataffi, the Italian girl who, fleeing with her lover against the wishes of her family, became the mistress of magic, and could read the secrets of the past and probe the future of many a life. She prospered, now and then seeing the man who had won her heart in early life, but having little or nothing to do with him. There came a time when the whole city was startled by a crime which seemed to shock even the detectives, used as they were to deeds of blood."

"One night an old man known as Noah Moneybox, on a visit to the house of magic, discovered Madame Medusa murdered in her chair with a Silver Dagger in her bosom. Noah Moneybox knew something about that deadly blade; indeed, he was in its shadow when he went to the house, for a man had lately called on him and threatened him with its point unless he loaned to another person, who was at the very head of a secret league, a sum of money the loss of which would have broken the old man's heart."

"Madame Medusa received Noah Moneybox, as you know, with the hilt of the dagger sticking above her bosom. The old man's next move was to tell what he had seen, and he told it to you. He put you on a trail which has not been unexciting; he was the means of bringing you to the trap which I had set, but of that more anon. We will go back to Madame Medusa."

"She, as the divorced wife of Mark Marigold, the adventurer, who, while she sat dead in her chair, smoked cigars in his elegant home in New York, had not forgotten the past nor the life of the man she had wedded. She wrote out the whole story of that past, signed it and hid it somewhere in the house of secrets. She left nothing untold; she told how she belonged to the dark orders which had taken life and robbed the honest in more lands than one; she identified her daughter in order that she might claim the fortune she expected to leave behind, and named the members of the last league, at the head of which stood her husband—the League of the Silver Dagger."

"All this had been done when Noah Moneybox found her murdered in her chair. I don't think it was very hard for the old man to guess who had committed the crime, but he would not have told it for the world for he was in the shadow of the same death."

Up to this point of narration Jason Clew had not interposed a word.

"Did Noah know the fortune-teller's past?" he asked.

"He knew some of it. Some secrets which

Madame Medusa kept from others she had imparted to him; but, always fearful of fate, old Noah was not a good *confidant*. If the money-fist had come a little sooner that night he might have been a witness to the murder, but it had a witness for all that."

"A witness, Daniz?"

"Yes; there was hidden in the house at the moment one who had the entree at all times, and who came and went at all hours. Her face, seamed with sorrow, was beautiful, and her feet gave out no sounds. She had been taken in by Madame Medusa with the tenderness of a mother, and was with her often, even helping her to deceive the public with her black arts. This person saw the advent of the assassin; she saw from one of the secret chambers of the house of magic the descent of the silver dagger."

"We call her Inez. We call her 'the girl without a tongue,' and there are some who believe that she is tongueless, but this is not true. Inez is a mute. She has not spoken from her birth, but she has faculties that seem to supply the loss of speech. She can read the human lip. Inez was in the house that night, I say. You have thought that she killed Madame Medusa because you have seen her go through the pantomime of murder, plunging the dagger into the back of the witch's chair, and even pretending to draw it out again."

"The girl came back to me that night and went through the whole scene in my presence, giving me the first idea of the crime. Her pantomime was as good as speech would have been, and by watching her I knew that the silver dagger had found the fortune-teller's heart. Inez has been a mystery to you, Jason Clew. You have wondered, too, why I wanted to entrap you. Why, man, I belong to the Dagger League."

A smile passed over Daniz's face when she had spoken the last sentence.

"I suspected that," said the detective. "But tell me more about Inez."

"She drifted into my hands in a singular manner, not necessary to relate here because it does not belong to my story. I was to watch her like a hawk, and I did my work as well as I could, but she would give me the slip, and I was not long discovering that during these absences she was with Madame Medusa. Few knew the secret which the fortune-teller kept so well—the one which she confided to the paper on which she recorded the story of her life. I knew it. The man who is at the head of the Silver Dagger knows it, but beyond us I believe it is shared by no one."

"What about Nicobar and his friend, Jack Dunbar?"

"They have suspected, but beyond that, know nothing. Even now the secret is the quest of Jack Dunbar, who has a strange influence over Inez. With it in his hands he would have an iron grip on the Man of the League; but it has escaped him thus far. Madame Medusa knew why she wanted Inez near her. A mother's heart always yearns for her child, no matter what intervenes."

"What was that?" cried the Silk-handed Ferret, of Gotham. "Say that again, Daniz."

"Certainly, and I will make it plainer. Madame Medusa was the mother of Inez!"

A dead silence fell between the detective and the Dago. There was a glitter in the eyes that confronted the ferret, and Jason Clew found himself almost rising from his chair while he watched the woman who had entrapped him.

"Now you know the secret Madame Medusa kept so well—the secret which she carried into the unknown world. You have tried to wrench from Inez the story of that night of crime; but every time she has met and baffled you."

"That is true."

"The girl is as shrewd as she is beautiful. That crime which she so unexpectedly witnessed has thrown another shadow over her life. I believe she would suffer death before she told the whole truth."

"Then, she knows who did the deed? She saw the face of the murderer?"

"Not quite that far," was the reply. "The face that crept behind Madame Medusa was masked."

Jason Clew's countenance fell in disappointment.

"But you know the whole truth; you, Daniz—you know who did the deed."

The eye of the Dago fell.

"You forget that the oath of the Silver Dagger lasts forever," she said. "You forget that I have told you the story of Medusa in the very shadow of that blade to which I once swore eternal fealty."

The lips of Daniz closed firmly behind the last words.

"While the girl saw not the face of the murderer she knew him," the woman went on. "This is the secret you have failed to worm from her. Jason Clew, you have been picking up, link after link, the chain of crime; but Inez has baffled you."

"I have not finished," said the detective. "I am still on the trail. I am nearing the end, and the identity of the dumb girl, while startling, will not check me."

"I thought as much."

The New York ferret unlocked a drawer at the table and took there from a note-book from which, in turn, he drew a piece of paper which he passed to his visitor.

"Where did you find this?" asked Daniz, looking up with a start.

"In a crack on the stairway leading to the last room you occupied before you fled and hid from me."

"It tells you nothing after all. See, it is not signed!"

"No, but I saw the man deposit it in the strange post-office. I was on the stairway at the time—almost within reach of his hand. I could have touched him by leaning forward. Daniz, this note was intended for you. I have read between the lines, and it told me a good deal. I will now tell you something, but not something which you do not know."

"Go on, Jason Clew."

For a moment the eyes of the detective twinkled.

"It is this: Major Phenix was the husband of Madame Medusa, and Inez is his child!"

The look on old Daniz's face confirmed the ferret's words.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HUMAN HYENA.

THE husband of Madame Medusa and the father of Inez.

Jason Clew watched the dark face before him, and saw the play of light and shadow upon it.

It was some time before the old woman spoke again.

"I need not tell you more," she said. "The rest is for you, Jason Clew."

She left her chair and stood at the table, her tall figure rising in the light, and her eyes looking down upon him.

"The rest is for me, as you say, Daniz," answered the detective. "I promise you that I will not fail."

"Where is Inez now?"

"Do you want to watch her again?"

"Not that; but she must not remain under the influence of Jack Dunbar."

"Leave that also to me."

"I will."

A moment later the woman who had revealed a secret stood at the detective's door.

Jason Clew did not detain her, but watched her as she opened the portal and peered out with a pallor of fear on her face.

"She is afraid to venture out, such is her horror of the League, whose secrets she has exposed," thought the ferret. "There is real danger; the old hag is in the shadow of the silver-hilted blade, but I will let her go."

With a last look at the detective the strange woman slipped out and closed the door after her. She was heard to go down the steps, and then her footsteps died away.

After awhile the detective followed her, but she was not in sight when he struck the street.

He went back to the girl who had been to him a mystery, and found her where he had found a home for her beyond Jack Dunbar's ken.

Inez arose to meet him as he crossed the room, but all at once, as if she read with her eye the secret he had discovered, she fell back and hid her face in her hands.

"Does she suspect?" asked Jason. "Does she believe that she was the child of Madame Medusa? What if she has discovered the documents left behind by the queen of magic?"

But Inez soon relieved him of these fears, and he knew that she suspected nothing.

Half an hour later, when the ferret of Gotham emerged from the house, he was followed by a shadow as soft-footed as himself, and when he plunged into a dark alley which terminated near the house where he had last seen Noah Money-box in the throes of death, he was followed still.

This shadow had the figure of a lithe, active man. It slid over the ground, and when the door of the shanty closed on the detective it pressed on and halted at last, on the very threshold of the place.

Jason Clew remained in the house but a little while, and when he again showed himself at the door, the watcher drew back, and seemed to regard him with eyes that blazed.

"I was to settle him—to play the last deadly trump of the game," said the human hyena under his breath. "If we miss him now we will pay the penalty. Jason Clew is as sure as death itself—unless death overtakes him first."

For a moment the detective stood in the shadow of the shanty from which he had just emerged, and then the watcher, moving one foot forward, threw his whole weight upon him.

Clew went to the wall, hurled against it as though he were thrown outward by the force of an explosion.

Before he recovered the hand of the man-hunter was at his throat, and a struggle for the mastery began.

Jason felt the powers of the hyena by whom he was attacked; he felt the hot hands that seemed to meet behind his windpipe, and wondered why the attack was not followed up with a blow from a dagger.

All at once he was pushed against a door which, withstanding the weight of both men for

but an instant, gave way and they fell into the dark.

In a moment there was a wild shriek as a woman fled from the house, and then Jason felt something that seemed to burn its way for an instant into his flesh.

The detective knew that the knife had fallen.

Consciousness seemed to leave him with the descent of the dagger, and when it came back he found himself lying on the floor of a carpetless room with a woman looking down at him by the light of a lamp.

"I thought you were done for," said the woman, who was young and pallid of face. "I came back after the fight and found you here. The man who tried to take your life is gone. I suppose he left you for dead."

Jason looked at his wound, which the woman had tried to bind up even before he came back to life, and discovered that he had had a narrow escape.

"Better than a dozen dead men yet," said he, looking up into the face above him.

"Who are you?"

The question was most natural under the circumstances, and the detective said:

"I am an officer."

"My God!"

The woman drew back and for a moment looked at him in absolute terror.

"I almost wish I had not touched you," said she with a curious smile. "I hate your sort of people. You sent my father up the river and he left me in wretchedness and crime—to hate you detectives. Who wanted your life—an old enemy?"

"Perhaps. Did you see him?"

"For a second only," was the reply. "I caught sight of him in the light of my lamp, but he was gone in a flash."

"What was he like?"

"He had a form like an athlete and was as quick as a cat in his movements. But that was not what most attracted me?"

"Well?"

"His knife-handle seemed to shine like silver. I saw it as I rushed from the house with terror in my heart."

"You saw him strike?"

"No, I did not; but I knew he would use the blade. There was murder in his eye. When I ventured back he was gone and, as I've said, I almost wish I had not returned at all, because I hate your kind."

Jason Clew walked from the house and took his way back.

Suddenly his foot struck something lying in his path and he stooped over it, his hand feeling in the dark.

"What, another victim?" cried the detective, then he saw the form of a man lying in the alley near the dark line of buildings.

The man was dead!

In another moment he was going back to the girl.

"That is not the man who wanted your blood," said the young woman, when she had looked into the upturned face of the dead one. "I never saw this person before. He must have been killed by the other one while quitting the alley."

Jason Clew went back to his den nursing the wound he had received.

There sat in the chair at his table the boy ferret whose face had haunted him in more than one dream.

"Been waiting for you," grinned Davy Sharp. "Here's something for you to look at," and the boy tossed upon the table a package of papers which Jason took up as he dropped into a seat.

"Heavens, Davy, where have you been hunting?" he suddenly cried.

"Where papers of that sort are to be found—in Madame Medusa's house. I found more, but the others I had to surrender in order to get away with these. I threw the others into Jack Dunbar's face and came off with what I thought would prove the most valuable. They're worth something, ain't they?"

"I should say so," said Jason, forgetting his adventure in his deep inspection of the documents.

"Daniz told the truth," he said. "Here is the story of Madame Medusa's life written by herself."

"I thought so from what I read on the outside wrapper when I found the packet," answered Davy. "But in the name of wonder, where have you been wallowing in the dirt?"

Jason laughed.

"I have had a little tussle for life in the dark, Davy."

"Looking for us, are they?"

Jason nodded.

Davy Sharp looked across the table, not at the papers so important in his eyes a moment before, but at the cool-headed detective.

"I can't afford to lose a partner like you," he said. "Jason, the firm of Clew & Sharp must not be dissolved by the dagger—not just yet, anyhow."

"I guess it won't be, Davy. We are on the home-stretch and must not let the Silver Dagger get in its work at this stage of the game."

Down upon the table came the fist of the young shadow.

"It sha'n't!" he cried. "I know a thing or two—I know who tried to rob me of the papers you hold in your hands. I know why. I haven't groped in the dark for my information, and by heavens! I want to compare notes with Nydia, the big maid in Major Phenix's house, and to tell her that I have seen Dan Nicobar with the Silver Dagger in his bosom."

"Be sure of what you say, boy. You told me that the face was covered with a handkerchief and that you could not make out—"

"I know it was Nicobar for he is missing. Dan Nicobar has felt the point of the dagger he swore by."

There was no reply. Did Jason Clew believe that the boy detective was right?

In another part of the city while this scene was going in the detective's house, Major Phenix sat in the parlor of his elegant home with placid countenance.

Lorene did not come in to disturb him by her presence, but another person entered.

Jack Dunbar glided into the room, having entered the house with a pass-key and stood before the Man of the Silver Dagger.

"We have lost our tracker," he said.

In an instant the face of Major Phenix lit up with a pleased look.

"No lies, Jack! Remember, I am not to be hoisted to the pinnacle of joy to be dropped into the depths of misery."

"I swear that we are free from the iron grip and the keen eye of the persistent trailer of man!"

Major Phenix stood erect, holding out his soft dark hand. It was seized by Jack and the two looked into each other's faces for a moment.

"Tell me all or keep the secret to yourself, just as you please," the nabob went on. "If you swear to me that Jason Clew hunts no more, I will be satisfied and you need not tell the story of his removal."

"I prefer to tell it," was the reply, and lighting a cigar, Jack took a chair and told without interruption the story of the hyena attack in the alley.

And all the time leaning over the balustrade of the staircase in the main hall, listened a young girl whose face was the hue of snow and whose hands were so tightly clasped that drops of blood trickled through her white fingers.

It was Lorene.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HAND OF NYDIA.

THE figure on the stair-case did not stir until Jack Dunbar had finished his story.

She listened to the narrative as she had never listened to one before.

Jason Clew dead? The man of trails, the great spotter, killed by a dagger? It must be true else the man who sat before Major Phenix smoking while he talked would not have had such a story to tell.

And she had been sold to that same man!

Lorene thought that of all killings this was the blackest that stained the calendar.

She thought, too, of Felix Delroyd, the man to whom she had given her heart, and wondered what he would say when he should hear that his friend and fellow prisoner in old Daniz's den had been murdered by the League.

Lorene went back to her chamber when she had listened to the narrative coolly spun by Jack Dunbar in the parlor and under the lights of the nabob's home.

"Who is down there with him?" asked a voice at her elbow and the next moment she was looking into Nydia's face.

The big maid had just emerged from her own room, but she had seen by Lorene's countenance that Major Phenix was not alone.

Uttering a slight cry, Lorene drew Nydia into her own room and told her all.

"Dead, is he? I don't believe it," cried the maid. "I don't believe that the villain down there could outwit the man of trails. He has lied!"

"But, Nydia, he told it all—how he tracked him into the alley and how they fell struggling through the door into the house where he struck with the dagger that never fails."

"I don't believe it!" repeated the girl with as much emphasis as before. "I'm going out."

Lorene looked at the maid, but did not speak.

Nydia quitted the house with caution and was soon on the street.

"I don't believe it," she said to herself. "From what the boy said to me, that ferret is not to be killed by a man like Jack Dunbar. I wonder what has become of the other man—of Dan Nicobar. He stepped out of the play very suddenly and don't come to see us any more. Something has happened."

Nydia went as straight as she could to the street where the Silk-handed Ferret had his room. She knew its location from what she had gleaned from Davy Sharp when he was a spy in the nabob's house, and, still firm in her belief that the detective was not dead, she climbed the stairs and knocked at the door.

A footstep beyond it sounded and the next in-

stant the portal opened and she stood face to face with a man who did not resemble Jason Clew according to Davy's word-portrait of him.

He held the door open and Nydia went forward.

"Where is Jason Clew?"

The eyes in the head before her seemed to twinkle.

"Who are you, miss?"

"I am Nydia."

"Ho," said the other, "then I am Jason Clew."

The big maid gave utterance to an exclamation of joy.

"I told Lorene so," she cried. "I said to her, with the story of Jack Dunbar still in her ears, that you were worth a dozen dead men and here you are as large as life and still on the trail."

"I am still on the trail," was the reply as the smile broadened on the detective's face. "So Jack has told how it was?"

"He told the whole story to his master and Lorene listened on the stairs."

Nydia was not allowed to quit the detective's chamber for two hours. She told the full story of her life under the nabob's roof, and Jason Clew listened with all ears for it was an interesting story.

It was the inside life of the man who was at the head of the Silver Dagger League, the, as yet, unrevealed existence of the chief of more than one dark circle.

When the big maid went back, picking her way through the shadows of New York, and looking every now and then behind her, there was a glitter of triumph in the depths of her eyes and her blood coursed swifter than ever through her veins.

Nydia glided cautiously into the house. It was now nearly midnight, and when she had closed the door she slipped up the stairs and halted at Lorene's room.

All was still beyond the door.

Nydia did not knock, but opened the portal and looked in. The room was empty.

With a quick bound, the maid went inside and stopped, with a white face, at the little table.

"Lorene?" she cried. "Lorene, child, where are you?"

The only answer she received was the echo of her own words.

For a moment the big maid stood like one paralyzed, in the middle of the apartment.

Lorene was not to be found at all.

"I heard no one in the parlor," thought Nydia. "She may be there, but—I will see!"

She rushed down the stair and looked down into the handsome parlor over the open transom.

No one there but a man, smoking coolly in the chair always occupied by Major Phenix when at home.

For a moment the girl stood undecided on the step, then, with a gleam of determination in her eye, she went down to the landing and advanced upon the door.

Major Phenix started when he saw the tall figure of Nydia standing between him and the portal.

"Where is Lorene?"

There was no answer for a second. The white smoke curled above the nabob's head and he took delight in torturing the big maid with his silence.

Nydia took another step forward, and towering above him with a look he could not but fear, said:

"I want an answer. What have you done with the girl who is not your child?"

Despite his half-fear of the strength possessed by the maid, Major Phenix essayed to smile.

"What, don't you know? Where have you been, Nydia? Lorene has gone away with her husband!"

The answer seemed to stagger the maid. She grew white till Major Phenix thought she would sink in a swoon at his feet, but she did nothing of the kind.

"With her husband?" she echoed. "You mean with the assassin, Jack Dunbar?"

"Just as you please. You don't call him nice names, but that is nothing here or there. Lorene has become the wife of Jack ere this, and your absence from the house prevented you from witnessing the ceremony, for I am sure Lorene would have wished you with her."

"You know better. You would have kept me back if you could, but if I had been home this infamy would not have succeeded."

"Ah? What would you have done?"

The tiger blood of Nydia, the big maid, was a lava flood in her veins.

"I should have choked the man with these hands!" she hissed, bending forward and holding her hands so near the major's face that he fell back, looking at them and noticing that they were itching even then to clutch a human throat.

"Well, you're too late," he managed to say.

"No, just in time," was the reply. "Where are they? Whither has this man conducted Lorene?"

He was silent.

"You don't want to tell me," she went on. "You have sold Lorene, the child of another, to this man for the price of blood, for the cost of a

human life. Major Phenix, it shall be the dearest act of a life of infamy and crime."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the vengeance of the law shall be poured upon the head of the Dagger League of New York. I am now in the field."

"Yes, you have played spy against me these many weeks."

"I have! I lived under your roof only for the sake of the beautiful girl whom you sold first to one man and then to another—both equally guilty of crime. I shall go with my story to the proper person. I go now!"

Nydia fell back to the door, watched by Major Phenix, who did not recover till her hand was on the knob. Then he seemed to realize the danger that menaced him.

"Come back," he said, and Nydia looked at him but did not move.

"You can't find them," he went on. "Lorene ere this is a wife, and in time, will be happy with the man who loves her."

"That man is not the blood-stained wretch called Jack Dunbar."

"You are severe on him. You don't know—"

"I know enough," was the interruption. "I know all I want to know about him. Nicobar was better than he. Where is Nicobar? Why don't you ask his rival, Jack, who swore that he should never possess the girl, whose future you have darkened because Jack knows too much. Major Phenix, do you think that by the sale of Lorene to this rascal the secret will remain safe—that the detective who has been picking up link after link of the chain of murder will step from the trail and give it up?"

A smile flitted across Major Phenix's face. It was noticed by the big maid.

"Jason Clew is not the man to quit this case. He never leaves a trail until he has reached the end of it with the guilty punished. He is merciless, and in this affair will know no pity."

While Nydia talked, the smile only broadened.

"Where is this wonderful detective now?" asked Major Phenix.

"Where he has been for days past—on the track of the Silver Dagger!"

"Why don't he close in on his quarry?"

"He is closing in now. The game is in his hand. He has but to close it and the prey is trapped."

"Come, come. We are alone and you might as well know the truth. This detective will never close in on anything. He is dead!"

"Jason Clew?"

"Jason Clew. Girl, you are behind the times. In the first place, you had to be told of your mistress's marriage, and now you don't know that the ferret is at the end of his last trail."

"But he is there alive. I swear it by the living God!" and Nydia, bending forward, looked down into Major Phenix's face and smiled till he grew pale.

"You don't know where I have been," she continued. "You did not follow me when I slipped from the house. If you had, Major Phenix, you would have tracked me to the office of this ferret of ferrets. You would have seen me talking with him alive, though wounded by the dagger which, for once, missed its mark and gave him another lease of life in which to close in on the Silver Dagger and clear up the mystery of Madame Medusa's death."

There was no reply from the man, who looked up from his chair at the gleaming eye and the cold face above him.

Nydia's words were a revelation that seemed to have dropped from the sky.

Was the detective still on the trail? Had Jack Dunbar overreached his mark, and, instead of lying dead in the alley, was Jason Clew actually closing in on the League of crime and mystery?

"Girl, you lie. By heavens, you don't speak the truth," he cried. "You can't frighten me by such words. Come, you have lived in this house long enough to know that I am not to be fooled by a woman. He is dead. The trail of the bloodhound of New York has ended, and you may go out and congratulate Lorene—if you can find her!"

For half a second the form of Nydia stood before Major Phenix, tall and grand of outline.

He did not look at her hands, therefore did not see that they were tightly clinched. He saw nothing but the play of resolution and passion in her eye, and when she fell back and reaching the door, with her face wonderfully white, raised her hand, he held his breath.

"I will congratulate Lorene, but not as the wife of that man," she cried. "I will stand before her, but she shall be out of the toils and free from the trap of the fowler. You shall feel the hand which you have deemed dead. The League of the Silver Dagger shall feel the iron grip of this prince of human panthers. It shall perish at the hands of the king of spotters—Jason Clew, of Gotham!"

That was all. The following moment Nydia opened the door, but Major Phenix sprang across the room.

He reached out his hands for the big maid, but her own met him half-way, and he was thrown toward his chair like a charge from a catapult.

"Go back and wait for the end!" said the girl.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
IN THE NICK OF TIME.

In a little chamber which was revealed by a gas jet that burned near one of the walls, and blackened it, stood a young woman who was the sole occupant of the place.

Every now and then she would go to the single door and listen there with blanched face and closed hands.

It was Lorene—Lorene, the once inmate of Major Phenix's house, the beautiful creature whose happiness he had sold to two men.

For more than an hour, since being brought to that house in a mysterious manner by Jack Dunbar, she had either paced the room or stood at the door listening like a prisoner at the door of his cell for the feet of the deliverer.

All at once a door in another part of the house was heard to open, and Lorene fell back with her gaze riveted upon the one before her.

A key turned in the lock, the portal was pushed open and two men came in.

Lorene had recoiled to the wall and was watching the taller one of the couple with the eye of a hawk.

"This is the lady," said Jack Dunbar, turning to his companion. "I believe everything is ready so you need waste no time."

The other bowed.

"What means this?" and Lorene suddenly left the wall and faced the stranger.

"She knows," said Jack, with one of his grins.

"She talks for time. She wants to hear a foot-step in the hall out yonder; but you have been told all. This lady is to become my wife here and now."

"Your wife?" and Lorene stood resolute in the presence of the pair. "Your wife, Jack Dunbar? Never! I will not plead for mercy to either of you. The man yonder is a wretch after your own heart. I know that he comes here to perform the ceremony upon which you have set your heart. Let him do it. There shall come a time, and it is near at hand, when he shall reap the reward of his infamy, and I shall take in my own hands the avenging of the crime of this night. You know the man you serve. You know the crimes of the person who calls himself Jack Dunbar."

She had turned once more to the villain's companion and was covering with her finger, while she addressed him, the man of the Silver Dagger.

"Do you know all his crimes? Do you know that he carries even now on his person the brand of a foreign prison?—that he was behind the bars of the Bagne, and stood twice in the shadow of the scaffold? Go up the river to our own Sing Sing and search the books there! See when 'Richard Doon' was admitted for a crime too terrible to mention. That man is Richard Doon. Go into one of the dark alleys of this city and you will find a human body scarcely cold. That man is Jack Dunbar's latest victim."

Jack's companion looked aghast, but on the face of Jack himself was a cool grin.

"Let her go on," he said. "We have plenty of time."

Instead of proceeding, Lorene grew silent and looked at the pair.

"Are you through, my dear?" said Jack. "If you have completed my record we will proceed with this affair."

There was no reply.

The next moment Jack had stepped to the girl's side, and the other was standing before them.

All at once, while Lorene fell back a step, something flashed in the light of the jet, and Jack Dunbar recoiled with a half-muttered oath.

Lorene stood before him with an uplifted dagger!

"This is one of the weapons of your accursed League!" she cried, showing that the hilt of the dagger was of silver. "It came from the room of the man who heads the circle of assassination, and I will plunge it into your heart before I become your wife."

The plotter stood still, looking first at the uplifted blade and then into the eyes that flashed beneath its point.

"She means it," said the other one to himself. "Jack would better let this girl alone."

Lorene stood like a statue on the carpet, seeing no one but the man of the League, and holding above her head the deadly weapon of the silent Circle.

"There is no escape!" said Jack at last. "You may hold the blade till your arms tire; you only postpone a little while the ceremony you would defeat."

"I postpone it forever," was the quick retort. "I will drive into my own heart should I miss yours, the same dagger which took the life of the witch of Gotham."

Jack laughed.

"Don't give her up yet," he said with a glance at the man who had come with him to the house. "This is a woman's whim—nothing more."

The jet flickered along the wall; shadows leaped where it burned, and Jack, looking at Lorene, thought he saw his opportunity.

Suddenly, daring the dagger so firmly gripped by the white hand of the desperate girl, he

sprung at her, and though the blade came down, he caught the wrist and held it in mid-air.

Lorene had been caught.

Holding her wrist till his fingers seemed to sink to the bone, the man of the Silver Dagger dragged the girl forward and shook the blade from her hand.

It fell and stuck in the boards at her feet.

"I told you so," he said laughing in Lorene's face. "There is no avoiding this ceremony. We are to become man and wife and when it is over—when you are no longer Lorene Phenix, you will look upon me in another light and there will be a glad future for both of us."

The hollow mockery of the last words seemed to send a chill of death through the fair girl's heart.

Suddenly she straightened.

"Go on!" she cried with the desperation of the hopeless. "Perform this accursed ceremony. Why don't you come forward and do your master's bidding? You are not afraid, I hope."

The "minister" came forward, but with a nervous shuffle. His face was white.

"Quick!" cried Lorene. "I want to know how far I shall carry my vengeance. I shall hunt you down. There are more daggers than the one sticking yonder in the floor. The tool shall share the fate of his master. By the heavens above us, I swear, before this crime is perpetrated, to visit upon the heads of both of you the vengeance of Lorene the wronged."

The tool of the villain hesitated.

"Coward!" hissed Jack, looking at him.

"I did not look for such resistance on the lady's part," he whined.

"I employed you to do what I wanted done, no matter what she did," was the answer. "Do you refuse?"

"No, but—"

"Go on, then. I take the blame, and the threat of the dagger is but the threat of one who will never carry it out."

The next moment the minister stepped forward once more.

He halted in front of the Silver Dagger and his victim and the first word of the ceremony was about to fall from his tongue when a sound startled all.

Hope came back into Lorene's eye.

As for Jack Dunbar and his companion, they looked toward the door and waited.

Some one was out there. The sound had betrayed the coming of some person and the foot-steps heard had halted at the door.

Suddenly there came a crash; the door which was old fell in and across the threshold leaped a man, at sight of whom Jack fell back and his companion made a rush for the hall.

Lorene, with a scream of joy which she could not keep back, stood and waited.

Jack Dunbar, too astonished to speak or draw his revolver, faced the man who had covered him and was looking over the shining barrel of a six-shooter with a grin of victory on his smooth face.

"By the eternal God, it is the detective come back to life!" he thought. "This is the man I left for dead in the house in the alley; this is the sworn man-hunter of the metropolis."

It was the Silk-handed Ferret of New York, and the grinning face in the hall—the face set on a pair of youthful shoulders—might have told Jack, if he had seen it, who had brought the ferret to the rescue of Lorene in the nick of time.

Davy Sharp in the hall had arrested the escape of the so-called minister and that worthy was standing before the boy ferret's pistol, begging to be permitted to sneak off and escape the snares of justice.

"Who told you?" asked Jack Dunbar, when he had been secured, and found himself caged at last by the indefatigable detective of the metropolis.

"The boy."

In another instant the eye of Jack fell upon the young detective, and Davy, with a smile, came forward, saying:

"It was the hardest ride of my life, Jack. When I saw the carriage roll away, with Miss Lorene in it, I found a place behind between the wheels, and hung on for dear life. Once or twice I was jolted off, and if you had looked behind you might have seen me running to catch up again. Then, when I saw you enter this house I went to hunt up Jason, and had some trouble finding him, else we would have been on deck before this. The firm of Clew & Sharp ain't to be sneezed at, eh, Mr. Dunbar?"

If eyes could kill, the little ferret would have dropped dead before the man who glared at him with the rage of a tiger, but Davy was safe, and stood watching the play of shadow on the face of the man of the dagger.

Half an hour later a cell contained the man who had stood in the very shadow of the altar, and when he looked out between the bars a singular expression overspread his face.

"I wonder how the major will fare?" he said to himself. "Will Jason Clew swoop down upon him to-night, or will he wait till he has a better hold on him? There is yet lacking the one great proof of the crime of the witch's house. They have the dagger—that was found in the heart of the victim. But the proof against the slayer is not so clear. They must

find Inez, and then get her to tell. They must, in some manner, loosen the tongue of the silent girl, and until that has been done the mystery will not be solved."

At that very hour, in another part of the city, Inez, standing before a mirror, was combing her long black hair.

The sudden shaking of the glass startled her, she turned to the door and quickly crossed the room.

Opening it, she admitted a man, from whom she recoiled, but not with a look of fear.

Jason Clew had come. There was a strange light in the eye which Inez saw, a sudden look of triumph which she could not help but fathom.

The detective looked at the surprised girl for a moment, and then drew from his pocket a mask, which he laid before her on the dressing-stand.

For a moment the eyes of the dumb girl were fastened on the mask of black velvet, then all at once her limbs seemed to give way beneath her, and she staggered to a chair.

The detective saw her sink into the seat, and cover her face with her hands.

A whirlwind of grief and fear seemed to have taken control of her soul. She moved not, nor looked up until minutes had fled, and when she once more met the detective's gaze it seemed that years had been added to her life.

Slowly Inez arose and went to where the black mask lay.

Picking it up she looked at it, and handed it back to Jason Clew.

The following moment she drew from her bosom her writing-book, and in a second her hand was at work.

The ferret waited with breathless interest. All at once the white and bloodless hand of Inez extended the work of the pencil.

Jason leaned forward and read:

"You have the proof. The wearer of the mask killed Madame Medusa; but for God's sake spare me the ordeal of sending him to the gallows."

Jason Clew looked up and encountered the dumb girl's gaze.

"If I can, I will, girl," he said; and when she had read his lips, she took up the pencil once more.

"Spare me that trial, for I know all."

It seemed enough.

Taking with him the mask, and exacting from Inez a promise that she would not quit the house, the detective of Gotham went away with the last card of the game in his hand—the trump which was the mask of the murderer of the fortune-teller of New York.

Jason Clew was nearing the end of his greatest trail.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SILK-HAND CATCHES ALL.

"I would like to see him again. I would look into his eyes once more, and tell him that I know the past."

The speaker was a woman, who stood in the center of a room on one of the quiet streets of New York.

She had reached middle life, but there still lingered about her face and figure certain traces of youthful beauty.

She was the woman whom Daniz, the Dago, had visited with the story about the stolen child, the same person who had gripped the old bag's throat, forcing from her the confession that Inez was her child.

This, as we know, was not true, and with a certain fiendishness which seemed an inseparable part of her nature, the old Dago had tortured this woman, till, falling in a swoon at her feet, she had effected her escape.

"I will go. It may be the last time, but I have sworn that I would stand before him once more and tell him that I know what became of my child. What was that Daniz said? My child a murderer? Merciful God! why did not the innocent die ere she reached the years of accountability?"

Ten minutes later a figure glided from the house, and after a long walk through the shadows of New York, halted in front of Major Phenix's home.

"This is the house I have seen time and again, and my heart has urged me to cross its threshold but my feet have refused. Now there shall be no holding back. I am here to confront the enemy of other days. I will stand before the man of many crimes—the wretch by whose connivance my child was stolen in my presence by Daniz and a man whom I have failed to track. Major Phenix shall tell me all. Nothing shall be kept back from me. I enter this house knowing at last where my child is—if Daniz spoke the truth—and he shall supply the missing links."

She went up the step and rung the bell. This time there was no Nydia to answer the ring, but in a few moments footsteps approached the door and it opened, to show her the tall, handsome figure of the nabob of M— street.

The light was dim enough to let her get but a glimpse of the man's face, but knowing by whom she was confronted, she slid into the hall and faced him when he turned.

Major Phenix, staring at his visitor, led the way to the parlor, where, the moment he saw

her under the gas, he uttered a cry which he could not suppress.

"You know me. I come back from the past like a ghost, don't I?" she said. "Major Phenix, as they call you, know that I am here for the terrible confirmation of Daniz's tale of horror."

The nabob started.

"What has that woman told you?" he cried.

"She has confessed. She has unsealed the lips kept closed so long by your command. She has told me that my child—the one stolen by her and another, because I crossed your path and baffled you when you were playing a deep game years ago—carries in her heart the stain of crime. I am here for a full confession of that deed of the past. I want the locket worn by my child that night. I will not disturb the woman called your daughter. I am not here to arouse Lorene. Let her sleep the sleep of the innocent; let her dream not that the man who gave her a home is the blackest villain in this great city, nor that his hand is stained with the most dastardly crime of the past."

All this time Major Phenix was looking coolly at the woman in the chair before him.

Her face seemed to call back the past with an emphasis that he did not like, and when she finished and he was to answer, he looked hastily toward the door and said:

"You have come for a confession from lips that fear no one. You have entered a house where you find a man cool enough to meet the emergency. I have not seen you for years, but the moment you came in and stood in the light of my chandeliers I knew you. Your child? Yes, I recollect her."

"And you know whether the story of Daniz is the truth or a lie."

"What if a lie?"

There was no reply for a moment.

"Do you dispute it?" and the woman leaned forward till she could have touched Major Phenix.

"I have not said that I do."

"Why should my child commit crime?"

"She may have had cause."

"If she had turned on the persons who stole her from me, cause enough she would have had. But Daniz still lives. I heard from her lips that my child has red hands—that she wielded the dagger which killed Madame Medusa, the witch of Gotham."

At this a change came over the major's face.

"Am I to know?" she went on. "I am here for the last time. I have lived almost from the date of that crime the life of a recluse; but now and then I heard from the outside world. I have been importuned to tell what I knew about your past—to relate the story of your marriage with the wife who wandered to the river and never came back to your house. Major Phenix—I call you by the name which sounds strangest to me—what are you going to say? Did Daniz tell the truth? Is my daughter the Inez who plunged the Silver Dagger into the bosom of the fortune-teller of New York, or did the old wretch lie to escape my strangling hands?"

The semblance of a smile crossed Major Phenix's face and falling back in his seat, he looked across the little space into the eyes that did not leave him for a moment.

"Woman, I prefer to seal my lips," he said, at last.

"Which means that Daniz lied!" was the quick response, and quicker than a flash the hand, half buried, came out from under the folds of the dress and rested on the edge of the table.

"Then I go ahead. I shall enter the game of discovery and vengeance. If Inez is a murderer it was that crime which made her so. If she is not the child of my heart, I will find the true daughter and bring all that is dark to light. No more!"

She stood before him the picture of avenging womanhood and he was looking up into her face with the mien of a man who had been hunted down.

"You don't know me," he said. "You don't know that I can open the past—"

"Open it to your own destruction."

Suddenly Major Phenix arose and threw a quick glance at the door which he had closed when his visitor entered the room.

She saw the glance.

"If you seek to detain me I will begin here the revenge which I have kept back in hopes that my child would come back to my arms and turn me from the thoughts of blood."

She crossed the room, he looking at her with the undecision of a weakling, but the moment her hand touched the black knob he went forward.

"Halt!"

Something more than a human hand was lifted in his face and he fell back.

"Another step and the nabob of the Silver Dagger will escape the hangman!" she cried.

The major was looking into the muzzle of a revolver, and with it within a few inches of his face, he stood like a statue of fear, biting his white lips through.

"I am going! If you seek to stop me I will carry out my threat."

That was all.

She turned the knob and the door opened.

As she stepped into the hall the front portal swung wide and a man stepped into the dim glare of the hall jets.

The sound of feet startled Major Phenix, but pleasantly.

"It is Jack!" passed through his brain. "The ceremony is over. Lorene is his wife, and I could torture this creature till she sunk in a swoon at my feet."

The feet in the hall came nearer. He saw the eyes of the woman watching the person he could not see, and wondered why he did not meet the gaze of Jack Dunbar, whose duty it was to spring forward and help him meet the person who had come to his house like a ghost from the past.

All at once the woman was seen to wave her hand at the last comer.

"There stands the man you seem to want," she said, and her finger covered Major Phenix. "I believe I know you. See if the head of the Silver Dagger does."

Major Phenix, suspecting that some one besides Jack had come, was a bunch of excited nerves.

He took a step toward the door; he looked into the hall the moment a face came in sight.

Heavens! It was the ferret of New York! Jason Clew instead of Jack had come.

The gleam in the woman's eye grew broader; she fell away as the cool-headed sharp advanced upon his prey, and the moment the lips of Jason Clew parted she laughed outright.

"I understand it all. The 'wrong man' has arrived!"

Major Phenix looked at the detective and suddenly a smile appeared on his face.

"You are welcome. I know you. I have been haunted by your eyes ever since the real estate agent tried to sell me the witch's den. I see before me now those same eyes. You are the detective of the metropolis."

With enforced suavity, Major Phenix went back to the chair at the table and waved Jason Clew to its companion.

"The perfection of coolness!" must have passed through the ferret's mind.

"Well, what is it?" asked the nabob.

"Not very much," said Jason in the same strain. "I haven't done a great deal. Jack was taken before he became Lorene's husband; I have Inez in my keeping; the girl has told everything; she has recognized the black velvet mask which was found in this house the day after the murder—found by Nydia and Lorene I should say—that is all."

For a moment the face of Major Phenix held its color. Then it became ghastly in hue.

"Wait! I have missed one thing—not very important, perhaps," said the ferret. "We have the papers left behind by Madame Medusa—the ones you did not find the night you searched for them in the old place. Did you look for them on the night of the tenth of June?"

That seemed enough.

"Jason Clew, you never had your equal," said Major Phenix. "I congratulate you. Woman, you should give this merciless man-hunter your hand. He has prevented your child from becoming the wife of Jack Dunbar."

"Inez?"

"No, Lorene!"

The woman in the chair seemed to swoon, but the hand of Major Phenix touched her wrist.

"Are you satisfied now? This game is at an end. This ferret here has discovered everything."

This was the outcome.

Confronted by the black mask and the story drawn from Inez, the mute, Major Phenix confessed to the murder of his divorced wife, Madame Medusa, a crime which the dumb girl witnessed, not knowing at the time the relationship that existed between them.

While the disappearance of Dan Nicobar was never made clear, for Jack Dunbar would not unseal his lips, the authorities believed that the dead body seen by Davy Sharp while lashed to the chair was that of Major Phenix's right-hand man, who had been killed by Jack because he was a rival for the hand of Lorene.

Old Daniz was overjoyed when she discovered that by the arrest of Jack and the nabob she had escaped the Silver Dagger, and Davy Sharp convinced her that she had nothing more to fear.

Inez came forth from her last hiding-place and told on paper and with her fingers the story of the crime which she fastened upon her own father, while Lorene found a mother in the person of the woman who had seen Jason Clew reach the end of his great trail.

Lorene of course became the wife of Felix, whose escape from Daniz's trap with Jason Clew the reader will recall, and Inez found a home in a kind-hearted family.

The worst of villains seem to escape the avenging hands of justice despite the brilliant work of the bloodhounds to-day.

Jack Dunbar died in prison before he could be taken to the court-room, and ten days later Major Phenix was found seated in one corner of his cell, in his heart a dagger which had a silver handle.

For a long time the detective failed to discover who had smuggled the deadly blade to the prince of scoundrels, but one day the secret came out, for old Daniz came sneaking into his office and bowing her head, confessed that for Inez's sake she had done the deed.

She did not want to drag the beautiful dumb girl into court and see her send to the gallows, as she would have done, her own father, dyed in guilt as he was.

Jason Clew promised to keep the old hag's secret, and to this day the smuggling of the silver-hilted blade to Major Phenix is one of the mysteries of the police department of New York.

Davy Sharp is still the close little friend of the detective and persists in calling the firm "Clew & Sharp"—a whim which Jason smiles at and, I fear, encourages, for, but for the gutter-snipe ferret, he might have lost more than one important clew.

THE END.

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